



The Rackmaster-General of Sharpenhoe

Sharpenhoe, twin to the larger village of Streatley, is first recorded in 1197. Its name means sharp or steep-sided hill spur and, as Bedfordshire's most prominent landmark, it dominates this part of the Icknield Way Path. The most significant historic owner of the land was the notorious Calvinist Thomas Norton (1532-1584) who was a frequent visitor before inheriting the manor from his father, a wealthy city merchant and freeman of the Grocer's Company of London.

As Solicitor General to Queen Elizabeth, Norton's professional activities included the 'examination' (interrogation under torture) of Catholics suspected of plotting her assassination after a Papal Bull had excommunicated Elizabeth and called on the faithful to depose her. His favoured method was to stretch the prisoner on the Rack, an evil device introduced from the continent in 1420 which induced excruciating agony (dislocating joints if necessary) to obtain satisfactory answers of a confession of guilt. It remained in use until 1640.

Norton gained his nickname in a year of terrible deeds in 1581 after boasting of stretching a priest Arthur Briant '*a foot longer than God made him*'. Another was the Jesuit, Edmund Campion, who began his career in the new Anglican Church but, becoming disillusioned, moved to Catholic France. He then made the mistake of returning to England where he ministered in secret to adherents of the old ways. Accused falsely of conspiring against Elizabeth, Campion too was 'examined' but refusing to recant was convicted and hanged on trumped-up charges of treason. Four centuries later, Campion was one of 40 English Martyrs to be canonised on 25th October 1970.

But Norton's earlier activities seem to indicate another personality. He is better known from his earlier career as a writer: a sonnet (1551), various ecclesiastical works including the translation into English of Calvin's *Institutions of the Christian Religion* and most significantly, as joint author with his friend and fellow lawyer Thomas Sackville, of a play *Gorbuduc*.

Performed before Queen Elizabeth on Twelfth Night 1561, it is the first English tragedy written entirely in blank verse in the style of the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca, a style later popularised by Shakespeare and Marlowe. Based on the legendary chronicles of Geoffrey of Monmouth written in the 12th century, it is a saga of murder, civil war and anarchy following the abdication of an ancient British king, narrated on stage with frequent interruptions by messengers and confidants bringing doom-laden news (parodied by Frankie Howerd's 'Up Pompei' TV series!). With heavy political undertones, it was a warning of the dangers of a weak kingdom without a clear succession repeating events similar to the Wars of the Roses a century earlier. The wilful Elizabeth was probably not amused: 20 years later, Norton's continued tendentious writings led to a brief incarceration in the Tower on a charge of treason.

A clue to his nature may be provided by the fate of some of his associates. In his formative student years his patron, Lord Protector of England Thomas Seymour, was executed in 1552 after falling from power during the reign of Edward VI. His father-in-law Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was burnt at the stake in 1556 for refusing to return to Catholicism during Mary Tudor's reign. His stepmother, raised in the household of Lord Chancellor Sir Thomas More (beheaded in 1535 for refusing to recognise Henry VIII as head of the English church) allegedly practised necromancy and drowned herself in 1581 after becoming insane.

Norton survived his father for less than a year at Sharpenhoe. His mortal remains lie unmarked beneath about six others in a crowded area of the former chancel in St Margaret's church, Streatley. He left a wife, Margery, three daughters and two sons whose descendants remained as local landowners until 1709. Only two tangible reminders of the family now survive: a stone slab on the site of School Pygtle, a modern house in Sharpenhoe Road, records the restoration of the old Free School founded by a bequest from his father Robert Norton and augmented by a rent charge on the manor in 1686 by Richard Norton; and the family' coat-of-arms is incised on a ledger stone near the font of St Nicholas' church in neighbouring Barton where John Norton was Rector from 1652-1662.

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