

Gervase Markham

Gervase Markham, the seventeenth and last prior of Dunstable, was elected in 1525. In 1530 John Longland, bishop of Lincoln, made a visitation to Dunstable Priory. He interviewed each canon individually and all of them extolled Prior Gervase's merits as a spiritual director and as an administrator. The bishop's report lists no faults, spiritual or temporal.

Henry VIII had, for some time, been trying to end his marriage to Catherine of Aragon in the hope that Anne Boleyn would provide him with a much needed male heir. On 10th May 1533, the newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, came to Dunstable. He was accompanied by John Longland, who besides being the Bishop of Lincoln was also the king's Confessor. With him were Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester; John Stokesley, Bishop of London and John Clerk, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, as well as six lawyers and Thomas Bedyll who acted as clerk. Prior Gervase Markham also attended the Court of Annulment, which Cranmer set up in the Lady Chapel of Dunstable Priory.

Dunstable was chosen for two main reasons. Catherine was confined nearby in Ampthill Castle and there was no stain on the priory's reputation, as witness Longland's previous visitation. King Henry was at Greenwich, all this time, pretending not to know what was going on. On the next day, Catherine was summoned to appear but she refused as she did not recognise the court and agreed with the ruling of Pope Clement VII that the marriage was legal. The queen was summoned each day but refused to come. Several witnesses were questioned in an attempt to prove the case. At 10am on Friday 23rd May, Archbishop Cranmer declared the marriage annulled. What Gervase Markham, or the people of Dunstable made of it, we do not know. This was the beginning of the break with Rome as the pope's authority had been so publicly flouted.

In the following year almost every religious house, including Dunstable, recognised Henry as the Supreme Head of the Church in England. Henry was very short of money so he sent his commissioners to every English county to record the total net income of each establishment. The priory was assessed at £334. 13s. 4d., about a quarter of the way down the list. In 1536 all houses worth less than £200 were closed down, their assets being taken by the Crown and their properties sold off for the Exchequer. Gervase Markham no doubt wondered how long it would be before the larger houses went the same way. In 1539 all the remaining monastic possessions were vested in the Crown and on 31st December of that year Prior Gervase, with his twelve canons, surrendered their priory to the king's commissioners. Gervase and his canons were granted pensions. He himself received £60 and twenty loads of wood per year.

Henry VIII drew up a list of new dioceses and cathedrals he wished to establish. Dunstable was the last named and the only one not to come to fruition. After the scheme fell through, the parish church was maintained but the roof was taken off all the rest of the priory, which then became a free quarry for the people of the town. Gervase Markham may have gone, initially, to stay with his brother, William, who owned property in Husborne Crawley. When William moved to Hanbury in Staffordshire, Gervase returned to Dunstable and lived there for the rest of his life, being cared for by 'Mother Finch', his housekeeper and Elizabeth Bray, his maidservant. He lived through the protestant reign of Edward VI, the catholic reign of Mary I and into the time of Elizabeth I. He died in 1561 and was buried in the churchyard on 23rd September. His will is dated 28th August of that year. He left money for the repair of the church fabric and for Mother Finch and Elizabeth Bray. He also left money for the poor of Dunstable at Easter and Christmas and for the poor of Hockliffe at Christmas. He shared most of his possessions between his brother, his cousin Anthony Stubbings and their families. In particular he left his 'chalice, vestments, ornaments and implements for a chapel and divine service' to his cousin on condition that he kept them in case they were ever needed at the priory in future, if not, they were to be sold.