

The Windsor Martyrs 1544

William Symons/Simons [later Simonds] and his brother Simon Symons, The Vicar of Bray.



William Simons 1544

Facing backwards on his horse & wearing a paper hat

Short Summary

Andrew Symons/Simons [also known as Beerman as he was a brewer] was Mayor of Windsor in 1510, 1518 & 1525. We know he was still alive in June 1540. His son William Symons/Simons was born about 1488 as he was aged 17 when he started at King's College, Cambridge in 1505, becoming a lawyer. He also lived in Windsor and, perhaps perhaps mindful of the turbulent times or out of 'convenience', became a religious fanatic. William was also Mayor in 1529 & 1542. William was one of three witnesses for the prosecution of the Windsor Martyrs. [not something to be proud of!] Four local men were convicted and three were burned at the stake for being Lutherans [too protestant] so falling foul of 'The Act of Six Articles' passed under Henry VIII. The fourth man was sick with the plague when they came to take him, so was left in gaol and later recovered.

Henry initially approved & condemned them to death but - too late - changed his mind, then had William tried and punished for 'perjury' by making him stand in the pillory in Newbury and then ride on a horse facing backwards & wearing a paper hat, through Reading, Windsor and Newbury. He was ruined by his public humiliation and died at some date unknown after 1547. Such was Tudor justice! The full story is recorded in the famous work 'John Foxe's Book of Martyrs' published in 1583, book 8 starting on page 1210, where you will find the image above with William on his horse in the middle.

This drawing of William Simons on his horse has been re-worked from the original [above] by David Ford, for research he will publish.



Summary by David Ford

Despite the religious reforms of Henry VIII's reign, the movement towards Protestantism in England was not as comprehensive as men like Coverdale would have liked it to be. In fact, apart from the break with Rome, King Henry and the new Church of England remained essentially Catholic in nature, a situation formalised by the Act of Six Articles. Those who found more extreme forms of Protestantism to their liking could, therefore, easily find themselves in trouble with the authorities. One such man was James Mallet, a canon of Windsor, who was executed in 1542 for having spoken "adversely at his own table" of the King's handling of the monasteries. Another was Robert Testwood, a jocular, but single-minded, chorister who joined the College of St. George at Windsor a year later.

Testwood had become a secret convert to the principles of Lutheranism, but soon found he was unable to keep his religious thoughts and feelings to himself. To his fellows, he declared himself in favour of the ecclesiastical supremacy of the King even in advance of this becoming law. Before they could complain though, the Dean announced the astonishing news that the Act of Supremacy had been passed, so Testwood escaped reprimand. However, while the Pope's pardons, which hung in St. George's Chapel, were torn down and burnt, Catholic practices there continued.

One of the chapel's greatest sources of income came from pilgrim donations to its many shrines and relics. Testwood became exasperated, one day, by what he saw as the misguided prayers of these pilgrims, and he tackled those at King Henry VI's Shrine head on. He denounced their pilgrimages as superstitious folly and used Lutheran argument to convince them of the error of their ways. He was so successful that he decided to try his luck with the pilgrims around the Virgin's statue behind the high altar. During their deliberations, Testwood knocked off the lady's nose with his key. This almost caused a riot and in no way endeared him to the local populace, not to mention the College authorities and tradesmen who relied on the pilgrims' pound. Some of the canons even threatened to kill him. The nose was retrieved by William Simons, a former Mayor of Windsor who appears to have been the most active Papist in the town. He did not forget the chorister's actions that day.

Still, Testwood was little intimidated. Soon afterwards, there was a Relic Sunday, when the Chapel associates appeared displaying a relic each. Testwood, however, would carry none, even when offered a number of alternatives. He made jokes about pilgrims dressing up in various sartorial relics and tore down bills extolling the merits of the Virgin in full view of the Dean. On one occasion, when a hymn to the Virgin was being sung, he indecorously expressed his disapproval by introducing, in the counter verse, the opposite of what had just

been repeated. The college authorities were not impressed and word of Testwood's antics soon reached Stephen Gardiner, the Bishop of Winchester had made it his mission to hunt down anyone who questioned the six articles at the centre of the new Church's long established beliefs.

Gardiner sent his chief agent, Dr. John London, to Windsor where he was installed as one of the college canons. He sent spies out into the town and quickly joined forces with William Simons who informed him that Windsor was not without support for Testwood's views. Henry Filmer, a tailor and the parish churchwarden, for instance, had complained bitterly of apocryphal tales of the Virgin related by the vicar in his sermons. Simons had raced the man to Salisbury to complain to the Bishop, but had been humiliated when his lordship took Filmer's side in the matter. Simons also targeted a local Protestant preacher named Anthony Pearson whose sermons had become very popular with the Windsor crowds. His patrons included the mayor, William Snowball, and Sir Philip Hoby of Bisham ('Abbey') Manor. Other victims of Simons' religious zeal were his own friend, Robert Bennet, a fellow lawyer and former Mayor of Windsor, and John Marbeck, the famous organist at the Royal Chapel. The latter was a student of Calvin who became the first man to compile a Concordance, or index, of every word in the English Bible. This and other illegal religious writings were found in his lodgings after the King agreed to a search for heretical books in the town.

Testwood, Filmer, Pearson, Bennet and Marbeck were all committed to the Bishop of Winchester's gaol in Southwark for trial under the terms of the Act of Six Articles. The 26th July 1543 was fixed for their trial at Windsor. Because twelve Papists could not be found in the town to fill the jury, Dr. London recommended that the Dean's tenant farmers be summoned to attend. The accused were all found guilty, but only after William Simons leaned on the jurors. The judges were John Capon, Bishop of Salisbury, Sir William Essex, Sir Thomas Brydges, Sir Humphrey Forster, William Franklin, Dean of Windsor and Thomas Vachell, but most of them were uncomfortable with the sentencing which was eventually left to Vachell, the most junior of the group. The prisoners were all condemned to be burnt at the stake. However, Bishop Gardiner obtained a pardon for Marbeck whose musical abilities he admired and Bennet's execution was postponed due to ill-health. For old time's sake, Simons later obtained a pardon for him too.

It said that, all night long, the prisoners called on God for his aid and strength, and prayed for the forgiveness of their persecutors, until sleep finally overtook them. Their guards and even the sheriff – Sir William Barentyne of Little Haseley (Oxfordshire) – were quite moved by their words. On 4th August, the small party was conducted from their prison, through the town, to a field below the castle walls, on the site of the Riverside Station. Having expressed, at the stake, sentiments of the utmost confidence and hope for their passage to heaven, the three meekly yielded to their fate amongst the flames.

Amongst those in watching crowds was the Vicar of Bray. So shocked was he by the spectacle before him that he swore to himself there and then that, no matter what the religious winds blowing through the nation, he would keep his head down so that he should always remain 'the Vicar of Bray still'. Thus the cleric entered history as the titular character of the famous English ballad. Some say he was the brother of William Simons. Encouraged by the Protestant deaths at Windsor, the chief persecutors, London and Simons, prepared themselves to seek out further Berkshire heretics. However, they were completely unaware that they had taken things much too far and their fall was imminent.

Out hunting soon afterwards in Guildford Park (Surrey), King Henry met with Sir William Barentyne and Sir Humphrey Forster, and enquired how well the Sword of Justice had been wielded in Windsor. They told him the tale of the execution of the three poor townsmen and declared that it went much against their consciences to condemn them. King Henry was touched and exclaimed, "Alas! Poor innocents!" Upon his return to Windsor, he ordered Dr. London and William Simons to be apprehended. They were subsequently convicted of perjury and sentenced to stand in the pillory and then ride round the towns of Windsor, Reading and Newbury, with paper hats on their heads inscribed with their offences, and with their faces towards the horses' tails.

The circumstance of Henry's causing these Papists to be punished for their zeal against Protestantism, after he had approved of the Act of Six Articles, is telling. Henry was a fickle monarch and he created one of the most dangerous periods of history, not only in Berkshire, but across the country.