That was how Bray acquired a vicar and it was a Vicar of Bray who was to give Bray fame. The Oxford dictionary defines the Vicar of Bray as a *"Systematic Turncoat"* and although he was not the only one to have been that in the turbulent times in which he is said to have lived he is the only one to have achieved immortality through a ballad. Much has been written about this vicar, and the legend attached to him and there has been much speculation as to who he was. This is natural with any legend and it is important to remember when reading what follows that, if it proves impossible to pinpoint the man, the legend still remains.

This, then, is what we know. The references to the Vicar in Kerry's *Hundred of Bray* and the *Victoria History of the Counties of England* take their cue from a book called Fuller's *Worthies*. This was a book first published in 1662, at the time of Charles II, and its full title was *The History of the Worthies of England endeavoured by Thomas Fuller D.D.* Fuller, himself, was a noted, and perhaps even the most famous, wit, preacher and church historian of the seventeenth century. His six volume history of the *British Church from the Birth of Christ until 1649* is still an accepted book of record.

He spent many years compiling his *Worthies* which treats each county separately and deals with the proverbs, martyrs, magistrates and others associated with it. In the chapter on Barkshire, spelt then with an "a" as it is pronounced today, he wrote this. *"But first we will dispatch the sole proverb of this county: viz The Vicar of Bray will be Vicar of Bray still".* He then goes on *"The vivacious vicar hereof living under Henry VIII, Edward VI, Queen Mary and Queen Elizabeth was first a Papist, then a Protestant, then a Papist, then a Protestant again".* He had seen some martyrs burnt (two miles off) at Windsor and found their fire too hot for his tender temper. This Vicar being taxed by one for being a turncoat and an unconstant changeling, *"Not so"* said he, *"for I alwaies kept my principle which is this, to live and die the Vicar of Bray. Such many now adayes, who though they cannot turn the wind, will turn their sails and set them so that wheresoever it bloweth their grist shall certainly be grinded".* Fuller then names three martyrs who were burnt at Windsor under Henry VIII

Of course, Fuller wrote this about 100 years after the event (Henry VIII finally broke with Rome in 1533 and Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558) and we do not know his sources of reference, whether they were merely hearsay or documents. But with Fuller's reputation, there can be no doubt that there was a proverb and a legend about a Vicar of Bray when he wrote the *Worthies*.

The famous ballad must have been written, by its unknown author, about sixty years after Fuller's book was published, for the story starts with Charles II in *good King Charles's golden days, lives through Royal James, William our Deliverer, Glorious Anne, and then George I, when having changed his religion the Vicar changes his politics and finally becomes a Whig.* (The period covered is sometime before 1685 when Charles II died and sometime after 1714 when George I came to the throne). We have to assume, therefore, that there were either two vicars, living more than 100 years apart who acquired the reputation of a systematic turncoat or that the author of the ballad used Fuller's story as a peg on which to hang a satirical song. *The verses of this ballad are printed on the back cover.*

The latter seems the more likely. The reign of George I was a time of cynicism and satire. In politics for instance, Anne had abandoned the Whigs and formed a Tory government. The Whigs then courted George of Hanover, the likely successor, and when he did succeed the Whigs won. In those days, anyone who wished to be on the winning side had to have an easy conscience and a nimble mind which is, indeed, what Fuller was saying in the last sentence quoted above. However, we can be certain of only one thing. The ballad was written at least 52 years after Fuller's *Worthies* was published.

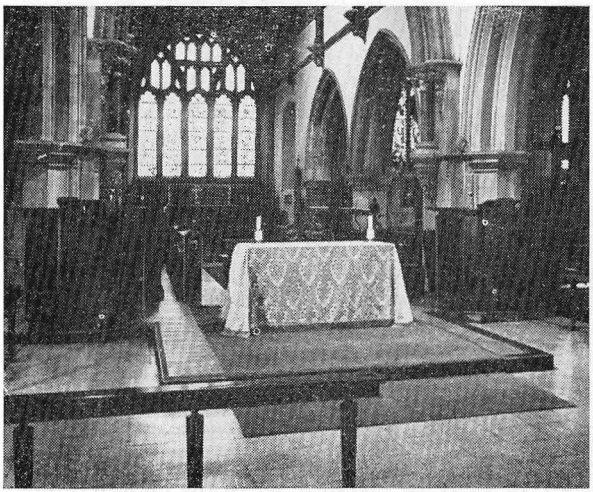
It would be nice to end this history of the legend by naming the vicar who fits Fuller's story. But unfortunately that cannot be done. The archives at Salisbury (Berkshire was in the diocese of Salisbury until 1836 when it went to Oxford) reveal that there was not one vicar of Bray during the

period from the Reformation to Elizabeth, but three. There was a Symon Symonds who was vicar until 1547 about the time of Henry VIII's death. He was succeeded by a William Stafferton, last of the Chauntry priests at Bray, who was still vicar in 1553 when Mary came to the throne. In 1556 the bishop's records state that Bray had no vicar and this was ordered to be amended. (Mary was still alive then). There is then a gap in the records because there was a change of bishops and the next reference to Bray occurs with the death of Simon Aleyn in 1565.

It is Simon Aleyn, in fact, on whom the popular choice has fastened. It could be right. He certainly died as the Vicar of Bray which the legend says the Vicar intended to do. He could have been the vicar during part of Mary's reign and if he were he would certainly have been a papist then. But he was not the vicar at the time of the Reformation. Nor was he the curate because we know from that Commission appointed by Henry VIII to confiscate the chauntries that Bray had no curate although it had a chauntry priest. Simon Aleyn might have been that but it is unlikely. In fact, we do not know what he was before he was appointed vicar. What we do know is that the legend of the Vicar of Bray has come down at least 330 years until it is now part of English Folklore and the language. With that we have to be content.

Aleyn, however, whatever else he did, probably acquired for the church one of Bray's historical relics, Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. John Foxe who had made a lifetime study of martyrdom published his book in 1563 under the title of *Acts and Monuments of those Latter and Parlous Times*. It rapidly became known as the *Book of Martyrs*, was placed in churches, was read by Drake to his men at sea, and was a major influence on thought in the Elizabethan age. The copy at Bray was chained to a desk at the West end of the church but its condition deteriorated and it is now kept, with part of the chain still attached, in the vestry.

Sanctuary arrangement for Holy Communion services



LIST OF THE VICARS OF BRAY

REINBALD, 1081

ROGER, 1288

HENRY DE CHILBALTON, 1301

ROGER DE CROSSBY, 1327

WILLIAM SCHERREVE, 1368-1375

JOHN DRAY, resigned 1382

THOMAS GERNON, 1382-1396

WILLIAM DYER, M.A., 1396-1440

ROBERT MANFELDE, 1440-1443

THOMAS PASHE, 1443-1444

THOMAS TOPOLYF, 1444, resigned 1444

THOMAS LUYDE, 1444-1454

WILLIAM MORYS, 1454-1478

THOMAS PHILLIPPIS, 1478-1497

JOHN PERKWYN, 1497

JOHN HALLE, resigned 1504

RICHARD WATTS, 1504-1520

JOHN MOGERYGE, 1520-1523

SYMON SYMONDS, 1523-1547

WILLIAM STAFFERTON, 1547-1554

SIMON ALEYN, died 1565
This is he of whom ye proverb "The Vicar of Bray still"

HENRY CRANSHAWE, 1565

DAVID TUKE, resigned 1599

EDWARD CRANCESHAWE, 1599

EDWARD BOUGHTON, 1621

ANTHONY FARINGDON, (No date)

HEZEKIAH WOODWARD, 1650

FRANCIS CARSWELL, died 1709

THOMAS BROWN, 1709-59

GEORGE BERKELEY, M.A., 1759-69

HON. GEORGE HAMILTON, 1769-87

EDWARD TOWNSHEND, 1787-1822

WALTER LEVETT, M.A., 1822-25

GEORGE AUGUSTUS LEGGE, 1825-26

WALTER LEVETT, M.A., 1826-53

JAMES EDWARD AUSTEN LEIGH, 1853

WILLIAM BRASSEY HOLE, 1874

CHARLES ANDREWES RAYMOND, 1887

WILLIAM S. RIDDELSDELL, 1915-31

ARTHUR JOHN JONES, M.A., 1931-45

EDWARD CHARLES LOWMAN, 1945-58

SIDNEY W. DORAN, A.K.C., 1958-77

NEIL HOWELLS, B.SC., 1977