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Henry VIII's scheme for creating new dioceses at the dissolution of the religious houses has received very little attention from historians. Perhaps this is because in the end it came to very little, or perhaps because of the paucity of sources. Five lists, including one in the king's own hand, generated suggestions of as many as 22 new sees by 1539, but only six were created between 1540 and 1542. Geography suggests that some of the six new dioceses were aimed at better diocesan administration, but the establishment of Bristol diocese was an untimely and illogical act which poses a puzzle. This new diocese had nothing to do with more rational diocesan administration, for it was not even geographically contiguous. When Bristol diocese is put into the context of the king's other new creations, it becomes even more puzzling. Why was it created nine months after the division of Worcester diocese, which had moved Bristol into the new diocese of Gloucester? It is to local circumstance rather than to the king that we must look for an explanation of Bristol's belated addition to the scheme for new bishoprics.

The idea of creating new bishoprics first appeared under Wolsey's aegis in the 1520s but did not gain the king's sponsorship until the dissolutions of religious houses made some wealth available and perhaps demanded some politic expenditures to justify the crown's rapacity.¹ At least five lists of potential new bishoprics had been made by 1539 when the House of Lords passed a bill authorizing the king to establish any he chose.² One list, in the king's own hand, listed thirteen potential sees.³ Another manuscript contained two other lists with particulars enumerated and two without, apparently compiled at different times by different hands.⁴ A total of 22 new sees were suggested in the five lists. Bristol was not on the king's list and appeared on only one enumerated and one unenumerated list. Three of the six new sees which actually were created appeared on all five lists: Peterborough (1541), Gloucester (1541), and Oxford (as Osney and Tame, 1542). Westminster (1540) appeared on all but the last unenumerated list. Chester (1541) did not appear on the king's list, which was limited to sees in the province of Canterbury, but did appear on the other two enumerated lists and one of the unenumerated lists. From the beginning, it appears, Bristol was not a prime prospect for a new see.⁵

The appearance of Gloucester on all five lists reinforces this impression, for most of the city of Bristol lay within the archdeaconry of Gloucester, which was in Worcester diocese.⁶ Already an ecclesiastical administrative centre, Gloucester was the logical choice for a see containing Bristol, in spite of the fact that Bristol was a much larger city with some 10,000 inhabitants to Gloucester's 4000.⁷ Given Bristol's position as the largest port outside London and the only city of its size not a see, it is not surprising that its monastery of St. Augustine received some consideration for conversion to a cathedral. Nevertheless, it appears that by December 1539, Gloucester had definitely been chosen over Bristol as the site of a new bishopric. When monasteries in both cities were dissolved, services were maintained at St. Peter's, Gloucester, while services at St. Augustine's, Bristol, were discontinued.⁸ The see of Gloucester was established on 3 September 1541, and Bristol was included in it – at least, that part of the city in Worcester diocese was included.

Since 1240, Bristol had been divided between the two dioceses of Worcester and Bath and

Wells. In that year the city, which lay in Worcester diocese, had extended its walls to include the suburb of Redcliffe, across the Avon river in the diocese of Bath and Wells. Some fifteen city parishes remained in Worcester diocese and three in the archdeaconry of Bath in Bath and Wells diocese. This division between two dioceses continued when the diocese of Gloucester was created, and the trans-Avon parishes remained in what had become simply Wells diocese. If better diocesan administration through reduced geographic area was the rationale for creating Gloucester out of Worcester and Hereford dioceses, this achievement was limited where Bristol was concerned.⁹

Rationality was cast aside in any case when the diocese of Bristol was established on 4 June 1542, less than nine months after that of Gloucester.¹⁰ The new diocese included the city and county of Bristol (from Gloucester and Bath and Wells dioceses) joined to the county of Dorset (from Salisbury diocese) and the manor of Leigh, Somerset (also from Bath and Wells).¹¹ This diocese, unlike Gloucester, had no pretensions of rationality, for the administrative problems involved in a diocese which was not even geographically contiguous, whose main parts were separated by some 40 miles of another diocese, were clear. This patchwork diocese was an unplanned oddity.

If from December 1539 until September 1541, the king had no intention of erecting a see in Bristol, what changed his mind? What prompted him belatedly to create this anomaly in English ecclesiastical history and in his own plan? Who wanted the establishment of Bristol diocese and why? The answers to these questions are to be found by focusing on local circumstance rather than the king's scheme for new bishoprics. The diocese of Bristol was more the creation of the city than the crown.

During the 1530s Bristol was the scene of a great deal of religious conflict, beginning with the preaching of Hugh Latimer in the city in 1533 and culminating with a visit from the radical George Wishard in 1539.¹² Particularly during the Latimer episode the corporation found events complicated by the influence of diocesan authorities. Its authority under attack by local clergy with ties to conservatives outside the city, the corporation tried to influence local preaching. Although national ecclesiastical policy in 1533 was in the hands of Thomas Cromwell, Bishop Clerke of Bath and Wells and Chancellor Bagarde of Worcester did not always follow his lead, and the corporation's attempts to assert control of city pulpits were hindered by the absence of centralized ecclesiastical authority. With two ecclesiastical authorities granting or withholding preaching licenses, sometimes without regard for the wishes of Cromwell or the city's secular powers, the municipal authorities had difficulty managing the popular religious conflict which erupted after Latimer preached. When they wanted Latimer back to defend himself and the corporation against the conservative clergy, Bagarde at first denied his license.¹³ Within months the corporation also was unable to get a license from Bath and Wells for the preacher of their choice, John Hilsey, for an annual civic service in a parish church.¹⁴ Hilsey would have countered the preaching of the outrageous William Hubberdine. In spite of these difficulties the local corporate élite does not seem to have seriously pursued a new bishopric in the 1530s.

A traditional story says that Henry VIII promised to make Bristol a city when he visited nearby Thornbury in August 1535.¹⁵ This might have been a response to visiting Bristolians' gifts as well as to their concern over his nomination of Latimer to the see of Worcester. He had, however, given the title of Bristol to a suffragan bishopric in 1534, a move which suggests no plans to make Bristol a genuine see.¹⁶ As for Bristol's governors, their job probably was made easier by Latimer's nomination since he stayed out of Bristol and governed his diocese in tandem with Cromwell.¹⁷ The newly obsequious behavior of Bishop Clerke toward Cromwell also made matters somewhat less complicated in regard to ecclesiastical policy.¹⁸

The king's religious reaction in the spring of 1539 and Latimer's resignation in the summer

clouded the situation again, giving the corporate élite reason to be concerned. The religious reaction and the harsh punishments dictated by the Six Articles Act inspired 500 indictments for heresy and many arrests in London.¹⁹ In Gloucester there were protests against the dissolution of monasteries and sermons against the king's articles. Cromwell's representative in the area, Thomas Avance, was in Gloucester in February 1540, meting out light punishments to those detected during the last visitation, and Bristol's mayor and aldermen requested that he come to Bristol to 'reform certain points.'²⁰ Apparently the corporation wanted his help before the city was visited by the new bishop of Worcester, John Bell, in April.²¹ There is no evidence that the visitation caused any problems, but the death of Cromwell in the following summer signalled the victory of conservative forces in the battle for the monarch's ear and the end of an era for local authorities accustomed to dealing with Cromwell in their management of popular religious discord. They were left to wonder if the king would return to more direct reliance on diocesan authorities and if harsh punishments of Bristol's religious dissidents would follow. The six men executed at Smithfield only two days after Cromwell's death included both Catholics and Protestants, and three of them had been active in Bristol.²²

These concerns apparently still did not translate into strong pressure for a local bishopric, however, for in just over a year the king created the diocese of Gloucester. This probably was the trigger which set in motion some effort in Bristol's élite to gain their own diocese. The inclusion of Bristol in a jurisdiction centred in Gloucester, a rival city, was threatening. The cities had recently feuded over scarce food supplies, and the prospect of Bristol having an episcopal authority influenced by this rival urban oligarchy was a serious matter.²³ In addition, civic pride suffered when Gloucester gained the title of city. To make matters worse, the newly named bishop was John Wakeman, who had been abbot of Tewkesbury, and probably a foe of the corporation during the Latimer affair.²⁴ Clearly, at this point the crown had no plan to create Bristol diocese, and the only other force interested and strong enough to change the royal direction was Bristol's secular élite. While no direct evidence of this pressure is extant, the context of the creation leaves no other explanation. Local concern with diocesan authority and, more importantly, the rivalry with Gloucester were strong motivations for Bristol's élite to seek a diocese of their own.

While the diocese of Bristol was created in the era of Henry VIII's new bishoprics, it cannot be regarded as part of his considered plan. He may have toyed with the idea of making Bristol a see, but gave the idea up to create a bishopric in Gloucester. The peculiar timing of the establishment of Bristol diocese and its odd geographical make-up indicate the existence of external pressure on the king, pressure which could only have come from Bristol's governing class.

Notes

1. David Marcombe, 'The Durham dean and chapter: old abbey writ large?', in Rosemary O'Day and Felicity Heal (eds), *Continuity and Change* (1976), 126. Geoffrey Hill, *English Dioceses* (London 1900), 387.
2. G. Hill, 387-88. 31 Henry VIII (1539), c.9.
3. Brit Mus Cotton Cleop E. iv, fo. 305; transcribed in Hockaday Abstracts 27, under 1539 (Glos Colln, County Lib).
4. R.W. Dixon, *The History of the Church of England* (London 1881), 222-225. Dixon refers to only four lists, but the last, without particulars, is in fact two lists. The whole is printed in Henry Cole, *King Henry the Eighth's Scheme of Bishopricks* (London 1838); see especially pp. 73-74. For particulars of the proposed bishoprics of Gloucester and Bristol, see Hockaday Abstracts 27, under 1539 (P.R.O. Aug. Misc. Book 24, fos. 1, 13-14, 46-47, 27, and 71).
5. For the dates of establishment of all bishoprics see Powicke and Fryde (eds), *The Handbook of British Chronology* (2nd edn, London 1961).
6. R.M. Haines, *The Administration of the Diocese of Worcester in the Fourteenth Century* (London 1965), 13.
7. David H. Sacks, 'Trade, Society and Politics in Bristol, c. 1500-c.1640' (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard

- 1977), 204–13; W.G. Hoskins 'English Provincial Towns in the Early Sixteenth Century', reprinted in P. Clark (ed), *The Early Modern Town* (New York 1976), 92–93.
8. *VCH Glos* 2, 26 and 78–79.
 9. M.D. Lobel and E.M. Carus-Wilson, *Historic Towns: Bristol* (London 1975), 7. Thomas Rymer, *Foedera* VI, III, 69.
 10. Isabel Kirby, *A Catalogue of the Records of the Bishop and Archdeacons and Dean and Chapter of Bristol Diocese* (Bristol 1970), 9 and 16; *VCH Somerset* 2, 67.
 11. *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, ed. Brewer, Gairdner and Brodie, XXII, 255 (grant 9), hereafter cited as *LP*; Thomas Rymer, *Foedera* VI, III, 78–80.
 12. The religious upheavals of the 1530s are discussed in detail in Martha C. Skeeters, 'The Clergy of Bristol, c.1530–c.1570' (unpublished diss., Univ of Texas at Austin 1984), especially 50–91 and 270–327.
 13. *LP* VI, 247. Brit Mus Cotton Cleop. E.v, fo. 262 (now fo. 394). *LP* VI, 433 (iii) and 411.
 14. *LP* V, 572 (14). BAO 04026 (1533, 3rd quarter, tenth week). *LP* VI, 863. Skeeters, 'The Clergy of Bristol', 56–59.
 15. J.F. Nichols and John Taylor, *Bristol Past and Present* (Bristol 1881–82) 1, 239. William Adams, *Adams' Chronicle of*
 16. Geoffrey Hill, *English Dioceses*, 382–84 and 388.
 17. A.G. Chester, *Hugh Latimer* (Philadelphia 1954), 108–58.
 18. Phyllis Hembry, *The Bishops of Bath and Wells, 1540–1640: Social and Economic Problems* (London 1967), 59 and 61–66.
 19. A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (New York 1964), 193.
 20. *LP* XV, 183.
 21. Hereford and Worcester R.O. 802 BA 2764, fo. 269.
 22. Skeeters, 'The Clergy of Bristol', 53, 65–66, 229, 280–82. The Catholic Edward Powell and the Lutheran Thomas Garrett were bound to the same hurdle, which carried them from the Tower to Smithfield. Powell, long an opponent of Lutheran teaching, had preached in Bristol against the king's divorce and against Latimer in 1533. In 1534 he was committed to the Tower for refusing to take the oath of supremacy, where he remained until his execution as a traitor. Garrett, who was a sometime chaplain of Latimer, was arrested in Bedminster, Somerset, in 1528, and his arrest was reported to the commissary by the dean of neighbouring Bristol. Robert Barnes, another Lutheran, had also been associated with Bristol. When caught carrying a copy of Tyndale's New Testament into the country, he had to do penance both at St. Paul's in London and in Bristol.
 23. In 1522 the king gave permission for the corporation of Bristol to purchase grain from Worcestershire or thereabout in order to lower prices for the inhabitants of the city. Ten years later, in 1532, the sheriffs of Gloucester confiscated grain which had been sold to the corporation of Bristol and sold it by commandment of the mayor of Gloucester. The Bristol authorities took the matter to the Star Chamber where the Gloucester offenders were ordered to make restitution and pay court costs. *The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar*, by Robert Ricart Town Clerk of Bristol, 18 Edward IV, ed. Lucy Toulmin Smith (Westminster 1872), 49 and 51–52.
 24. Skeeters, 'The Clergy of Bristol', 230 and 66–67.

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