

England's Culture Wars: Puritan Reformation and its Enemies in the Interregnum, 1649-1660

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Bernard Capp explores how godly reformers in England sought to create a better society and assesses the extent of their achievements at a time when Puritans were in an unprecedented position of power to reshape English society. Capp draws on many different sources from central and local government, personal anecdotes and pamphlets to give a lively and fascinating account of godly reformation from Whitehall to the small village parish. Indeed, it is often the highly personal and localised material which offers the most amusing, interesting and sometimes heartbreaking stories, and using this material Capp gives us many valuable insights into the lives of everyday people during a period of turbulent change. The book is divided into three parts: Part One discusses the mechanics of reformation, the institutions, the people and press, which drove the demand for a better society. Part Two focuses on offences or areas targeted for reform in English society, highlighting the exact issue under examination, how it was tackled by the reformers and the success, or otherwise, of such endeavours. Part Three focuses on local aspects of reformation outlining the reasons for the variety of successes within the localities. There are several major questions within this study: how far did the reformers try to change local communities by uprooting traditional behaviour and imposing their ideals? What methods would they employ and who would implement their programmes? What sort of resistance to their ideas did they encounter within their local and wider communities? How much did the reformers achieve? How far did those with different values evade the pressure for change?

Important points are laid down at the outset before these questions are fully tackled. As Bernard Capp demonstrates, the drive for godly reformation in the Interregnum was a significant stage in a culture war which had been going on for generations and where the fault-lines ran deep. On one side of this war there were the reformers pushing for godly discipline, moral reformation, humility, sobriety and good order. On the other side there were those who enjoyed a free community spirit and revelled in traditional folk culture and festivities. These factions clashed publicly over their different values and these clashes took centre stage during the 1650s. Places like Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk had already sustained and actively encouraged changes long before the 1650s. Parliament had passed acts prohibiting certain sexual offences, drunken disorder and blasphemy in the 16th and early 17th centuries. Certain aspects of godly reformation were already established and well known within English society. The Long Parliament, which put the Puritans in a position of power during the civil wars, had attempted godly reformation but encountered fierce opposition,

leaving the reformation incomplete and confused by the end of the 1640s. The radical political changes in the 1650s brought a driven elite to power, with new motivations for godly reformation.

From the outset the Commonwealth had a major problem because many of those who actively supported a reformation in English society hated the new regime for the execution of Charles I and the establishment of a republic. As Capp notes, the reforming agenda attempted by the Commonwealth was highly ambitious and historians have declared that godly reformation failed during this decade – even from the outset the regime had trouble in removing all royal images from English society. The Rump Parliament also tried to reform the traditional English calendar by removing fairs and market days and Christmas. These reforms had a limited impact on daily life because the traditional calendar had been in use for generations and people continued old customs.

In order to advance reformation the regime recognised the importance of the law and a legal framework to support its work. As Bernard Capp highlights, many of the laws passed in the 1650s that are regarded as ‘fanatical’ by historians developed from earlier legislation. Acts regulating alehouses and certain sexual offences were already well established by the time of the Tudor and Stuart Parliaments. However, to enforce these laws the State had to rely on dedicated men at all levels of government. As Bernard Capp makes clear, the highly controversial circumstances surrounding the creation of the republic meant that parliament was left with a narrow base of supporters to enact and enforce reformation. This major weakness continued throughout the 1650s. Despite purges and the engagement that was imposed on boroughs and the judicial benches, loyalty fluctuated. When the Protectorate was established not everyone welcomed it with open arms and it had to earn the loyalty of reformers. Luckily for Cromwell, Capp argues, the magistrates were more favourable and the Protectorate gradually attracted moderate support. However, this did not improve prospects for reformation, as the establishment of the Major-Generals shows. Another major instrument in promoting godly reformation during the Interregnum was the printing press. The regime tightly controlled the printing press as it tried to gain the public’s acceptance. Ministers favourable to the regime were given access to the printing press and promoted reformation, but Royalists continued to use the press, encouraging the observance of festive and folk traditions whilst mocking Cromwell through poetry and bawdy song. Capp concludes that the men and machinery behind godly reformation fell short of their ambitious goals.

Part Two examines the way reformers tackled various misdemeanours, and the extent to which they were successful in their efforts. The regime targeted blasphemy, swearing and non-observance of the Sabbath. The issues emerged partially as a result of the collapse of the national church. In particular blasphemy became a concern, with the emergence of groups like the Ranters and the Quakers. Bernard Capp points out that one of the root causes of the difficulty of suppression is to be found in the conflicts between previous and existing laws on blasphemy and the pledge in the Instrument of Government to allow liberty of conscience. In addition, although many ministers and city corporations were active in bringing cases to court, an indictment largely depended on the line being taken by the individual magistrate. Accusations of blasphemy were often used to curb anti-social behaviour, but they could also be used as means of attack in highly personal disputes, leading to a misuse of law. The observance of the Sabbath was a long standing flashpoint for both sides in the cultural war. Often the less observant would taunt those who were devoutly religious by playing games outside church or their houses. Again, the enforcement of the law depended on the magistrate and some magistrates did not enforce the law or were deliberately obstructive. There was some success in forcing markets to open on different days and banning travelling on Sundays, but on the whole Sundays continued to be a day of rest, rather than a day of religious observance. Capp concludes that the reformers failed in their goals.

The author then turns to look at the central focus of godly reformation - the reformation of religion in the parish, where ‘elect’ Puritan reformers stood against the sinful majority. As Capp points out, there were many problems with the Interregnum church. It had no leadership structure and a lack of ministers. Religion often became a spectator sport with two opposing religious factions arguing, laughing and mocking their opponents. In many cases, as Capp is at pains to point out, far from ‘toleration’, puritan ministers often caused schism in parishes due to their exclusion of the majority and their uncompromising and short-

tempered stance. The sacrament of baptism, for example, became more confusing for all, ministers and laity alike. With the focus on the elect, it was sometimes difficult for parishioners to get their children baptised. In addition, there were questions over whether an illegitimate child could be baptised. Faction and schism were only part of the story, however, as many puritan ministers became respected throughout their communities for their pastoral work.

As Bernard Capp highlights, the Interregnum was infamous for attempting to regulate the sexual behaviour of the community. The Adultery Act is indeed often remarked upon because the death penalty was aimed at married women only and not their partner in crime. The central question of this chapter is ‘Was it a decade of fierce sexual oppression or one where the law was a mere “scarecrow”?’ As Capp highlights, there were legal barriers to the enactment of the Adultery Act which made it ineffective, including the gaping loophole about affairs between married men and single women. There were convictions, but often the evidence was circumstantial and many of the accusations came from neighbours. However, Capp argues that the fear of punishment under the Act was enough to deter people from committing adultery. In reality, fornication could land you in prison for six months. This punishment was not rooted in moral concerns but financial, due to fears that the community would have to support many illegitimate children. Prostitution was also targeted as this was a longstanding concern, particularly in London. Prior to the 1650 act people were ducked, but after the act was passed people were whipped and branded and later deported to the colonies. One of the major failures during this decade was the lack of clarity over the legality of marriages. There had been many changes in the law and in addition to the upheavals of war many unforeseen issues appeared that were not catered for by existing legislation. Many couples were confused and many ‘irregular unions’ were consummated which bred anger. Overall, Capp concludes there were few convictions for sexual irregularities in the 1650s, despite the strict laws.

For Puritans alcohol alone was not an evil but the dangers connected with overconsumption were. There was a concern that people would spend too much on drink and other narcotics (which included coffee) rather than feeding their children. The Puritans targeted the alehouses which attracted pickpockets, prostitutes and gaming, often resulting in drunken brawls which disturbed the peace. In addition the alehouses encouraged Royalist disaffection, providing a location for them to gather to drink to the King’s health. The civil war had disrupted alehouse regulation, making the problems endemic and as a result the Puritans targeted alehouse licences for reform. However, as Capp highlights, there were major obstacles in the way of reform. Alehouses were often central to trade, many licences were held by widows, and often the magistrate would not wish to antagonise the community. The efforts to reform alehouse licences were localised and were tackled in many different ways. For example, John Bradshaw, Commonwealth judge and magistrate in Cheshire, limited the number of alehouses in certain locations and in Norfolk applicants sat stringent tests. Overall, Capp concludes that alehouse reform was patchy and ineffective.

The final two chapters of the second part of the book explore the authorities’ attitudes towards worldly pleasures: dress, dancing, music, art, performance and sport at both national and local levels. In this section Capp builds on earlier research to prove that the decade, although challenging for the arts, was not one of comprehensive suppression. Capp makes clear that restrictions placed on the arts were not products of puritan fanaticism but rooted in a myriad of biblical passages and existing laws. The Commonwealth saw attempts to regulate dress building upon regulations which had existed for centuries. Bills went through the House to ban make-up and black patches and to encourage modest dress; however, these did not become Acts. Oliver Cromwell wore what some considered extravagant clothing and many continued to wear their hair long. On the subject of music, Puritans disliked music in church regarding it as popish but, as Capp shows, Puritan attitudes to music outside of the church were far more complicated. During the 1650s it was difficult for musicians to earn a living. Many traditional sources, such as the court, theatre and church did not offer patronage. However, music still played a ceremonial role during thanksgiving days and banquets. The Cromwellians, upon realising the damage done to the profession, set up the Committee for the Advancement of Music, but it was not a success. Despite this, there were many public concerts and musicians relied on teaching. Recreational music flourished as people continued to learn how to play their own instruments. Concerns over travelling musicians were not a new issue, as the Elizabethans had classed

these people as vagrants. Again, these concerns about musicians in the 1650s reflected fears of disruptive and bawdy behaviour at alehouses. Capp concludes that music survived as musicians were still hired at weddings, revels and dances.

Again, similarly to music, dancing was only permissible in certain contexts and there was not a comprehensive ban. For example, John Hutchinson, the famous parliamentarian, had taken dancing lessons and private dance parties still remained popular in London and the provinces. The university towns of Oxford and Cambridge both supported dancing schools. Dancing for the poor was permissible as long as it did not take place in alehouses. However, there was a genuine fear that Royalists used dances to host covert meetings. Regarding the visual arts, few Puritans shared Charles I's passion for them, regarding them as popish, but again, attitudes varied, depending on context and content. Art had no place in churches or religious worship. Erotic art was considered foreign and popish, although clearly some art was considered acceptable, Cromwell kept marble busts in Whitehall and Hugh Peters had paintings commissioned depicting civil war battles. Almost everyone would have owned family portraits. Capp concludes that in the 1650s art was allowed to continue unless it transgressed moral decency.

Theatre closures, often associated with the Puritans, started in 1642 on the grounds that the theatres encouraged pickpocketing, brawls and promiscuity. However, at this time, the ban was only temporary and used in times of national crisis. In 1648 the ban became permanent and any transgressions led to actors being whipped. In 1649 soldiers destroyed the remaining theatres. However, as Capp is keen to show, this is only one side of the story and he argues that the theatre survived and that private performances and plays continued to be sponsored by patrons. As there were no full length plays acted in public, performers resorted to drolls. These were simple pieces which required little preparation. Playwrights, like Sir Willam Davenant, wrote more morally acceptable plays to get past the censors. Play reading and oddities were still popular, with the 'Thundering Elf' drawing in many crowds. As the 1650s progressed spectacles and sports grew in popularity. In 1655 the London Mayor's parade was revived and wrestling could not be suppressed because of its overwhelming popularity. The root cause of many concerns was fear over public order. There were no problems with hawking and hunting because they did not threaten to disrupt the community. Horse racing during the Interregnum suffered periodic bans due to security fears, as Royalists used them for covert meetings. However, many race organisers ignored these restrictions.

Part Three of the book looks at the implementation of godly reformation in various local contexts. Capp first examines Kidderminster, the locality of the famous minister Richard Baxter, and concludes that many accepted church discipline. This was due to Baxter being able to win over communities due to his mediating abilities and charitable gifts. As Capp states, Baxter was lucky because Kidderminster was not bitterly divided over religion. Capp then asks why reformation failed in specific communities, focusing on Southampton and Headon. In these cases the corporation and the boroughs were unresponsive to reform, whereas moderate progress was made in Scarborough and York because radical puritan groups offset the Royalist influence. In places such as Berwick, Northampton and Coventry godly reformation was a major success due to the effective co-operation between ministers and magistrates. In the cases of Wallingford and Maidstone, the councils had been purged leaving a hardcore puritan minority in charge. In the case of Rye in Sussex there had been a longstanding puritan presence and godly reformation had been underway for decades. Capp admits that Puritans realised that total reformation was impossible, but they tried hard to gather and inspire the elect and encourage the majority to live 'decent' lives.

Capp then analyses the extent of the success of reformation in Exeter, a place which was horrified by the regicide but became successful in its drive for a godly society during the 1650s. In some respects godly reformation was a success. Schools were built, and an orphanage and almshouses were repaired and there was a relief of the poor. There was an active pursuit of reformation of manners, especially blasphemy, but convictions fluctuated according to the town's overall priorities at the time. The authorities were active in enforcing the Sabbath; prosecutions started as a trickle but gathered pace as the decade continued. They were usually aimed at youths who would actively disrupt church services. Efforts to convict drunkards, single mothers and adulterers rose sharply. However, like all communities, there was defiance and divisions. For

example, a large crowd assembled in the centre of the town on Christmas Day in 1655 and Puritans endured mocking and name calling. In addition, Quakers caused disruption to religious communities and Independents and Presbyterians quarrelled. Exeter was divided in 1642 and remained so throughout the 1650s.

Bernard Capp concludes that the Puritan reformation in the 1650s fell short of its ambitious ideals. The Parliamentary movement had split into many groups and there were many structural problems within the Church, in addition to communication problems between the localities and Whitehall. The Church was 'toothless' and could not enforce discipline. Despite this, Capp insists that historians should not write off the Interregnum's drive for godly reformation completely and suggests that the Interregnum only lasted for 11 years and therefore the regime's limits should be recognised. However, in some local areas, the reformation had made significant progress. Compliance is rarely documented, but clashes and drama often are. Some goals were widely shared within communities and this did benefit the drive for reformation.

The subject of godly reformation in early modern England has been debated amongst historians for decades and the Civil War and Interregnum has always been acknowledged as a key period in these developments. Previous to Ronald Hutton's fascinating and all encompassing account of 'The Rise and Fall of Merry England' (1), assessments on specific aspects of godly reformation during the Interregnum were to be found amongst the many local and county based accounts of the period or articles focusing on specific issues.(2) Although the local accounts were often fascinating and comprehensive they gave us little insight into how godly reformation during that decade operated across England as a whole, only giving tantalising insights into the successes and failures of the reformers. Many of the articles that have discussed godly reformation in the 1650s on a national scale have often emphasised its failure.(3) Bernard Capp, like Hutton, puts the efforts of the puritan reformers into a wider perspective, showing that puritan efforts were often built upon those attempted by earlier monarchs. The major breakthrough in gauging the impact of godly reformation in England in the 1650s came with Christopher Durston's pioneering study into Cromwell's Major Generals. This study showed that it was possible to analyse godly reformation in the 1650s on a national scale comprehensively and systematically, and thus the successes and failures of godly reformation during this decade could be adequately assessed. Christopher Durston had succeeded where many historians before him had tried and failed and his study was a remarkable achievement.(4)

Therefore, with this in mind, it serves as a reminder that analysing and assessing godly reformation across England in the 1650s is by no means impossible, but it is certainly a major undertaking, beset by substantial challenges. Bernard Capp has written a highly significant work which greatly aids our understanding of godly reformation in England during the 1650s and is a 'must read' for all scholars of the period. In this work Bernard Capp brings together many varied accounts from all localities across England and at all levels of government, bringing together all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle and giving us a full and comprehensive picture of godly reformation during a fascinating decade.

Notes

1. R. Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1994) pp. 200–26.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. There are numerous local studies which discuss godly reformation - too many to be listed; however, some of the most significant are A. Fletcher, *A County Community in Peace and War: Sussex 1600–1660* (London, 1975); David Underdown, *Somerset in the Civil War and the Interregnum* (Newton Abbot, 1973); J. S. Morrill, *Cheshire 1630–1660* (Oxford, 1974); Andrew Coleby, *Central Government and the Localities: Hampshire 1649–1689* (Cambridge, 1987); A. Hughes, *Godly Reformation and its opponents in Warwickshire 1640–1662* (Dugdale Society, 1993); A. Hughes, *Politics, Society and the Civil War in Warwickshire* (Cambridge, 1987). Articles on specific aspects of godly reformation in England include: K. Thomas, 'The Puritans and the Adultery Act of 1650 reconsidered', in *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, ed. D Pennington and K Thomas (Oxford, 1978); I. Green 'The Persecution of "scandalous" and "malignant" parish clergy during the English

Civil War', *English Historical Review*, 94 (1979); K Wrightson, 'Alehouses, order and reformation in rural England, 1590–1660' in *Popular Culture and Class Conflict 1590–1914*, ed. Eileen and Stephen Yeo (Brighton, 1981).[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. D. Hirst, 'The failure of Godly rule in the English Republic', *Past and Present*, 132 (1991) 33–66; Christopher Durston 'Puritan rule and the failure of cultural revolution' in *The Culture of English Puritanism 1500-1700*, ed. Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 210–33.
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. C. Durston, *Cromwell's Major-Generals: Godly Government during the English Revolution* (Manchester, 2001).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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