

## Saint John Boste

John Boste was born in c. 1543, the younger son of Nicholas Bost, or Boste, a landowner of Dufton (near Appleby) in Westmorland, and his wife, Janet, of the old gentry family of Hutton Hall (Benson Row), in Penrith,

John Boste was educated at Appleby Grammar School and proceeded to The Queen's College, Oxford. He graduated with a BA in 1565 and MA in 1572, and as a Protestant, became a Fellow of Queen's, returning to Westmorland to teach at Appleby.

Under the influence of the Jesuit martyr St Edmund Campion (d. 1581), Oxford nursed a clandestine Catholic revival - and John Boste converted to the Faith in 1576. At the time of the accession of Queen Elizabeth I in 1558, the English were still an overwhelmingly Catholic nation, though largely prepared to accept the initial half-way-house of the Elizabethan settlement of religion. Over the course of the decades, however, as the Church of England took on a more Protestant, more Calvinistic, character, the traditionalist-minded majority was transformed into a *recusant* minority, with its backbone in the Catholic country gentry and their tenants, paying hefty fines for absence from the parochial worship of the Established Church. Women were to the fore in this Elizabethan Catholic renewal, which, since priests ordained before 1558 were now fading from the scene, needed to be supplied from the new expatriate seminaries established under the spirit of a Europe-wide Catholic renaissance which is today known as the Counter-Reformation or Catholic Reformation.

This new breed of seminary-educated priests, highly mobile missionaries, focused their work, in a circuit of protective manor houses, on covert celebration of Holy Mass and administration of the Sacraments. Their type was encapsulated by John Boste, who was trained at the new seminary of Reims in northern France, ordained at Châllons and sent on the English mission in 1581. These 'seminarians' knew the fate they faced in England, since in 1585 an Act of Parliament prescribed death by the horrific method of hanging, drawing and quartering for being in the realm as priests ordained abroad: they were seen by the authorities as agents of mighty Catholic Spain in a bid to dethrone the Protestant queen.

The missionary priests found it easy enough to enter their home country, with its large numbers of ports, harbours and creeks, and once landed, could spend a surprisingly long period of time before detection and arrest - in John Boste's case 12 years of heroic service, providing Holy Mass, the Sacraments and spiritual reading to the north's Catholic community. John Boste, identified by the government as 'the great stag of the North', was a foremost operator between the state's superb surveillance service and the Catholic community's underground counter-intelligence machine: he acted as a priestly scarlet pimpernel, disguised as a gallant, tracked in Hull, in Carlisle in December 1583 to January 1584, then in Northumberland in 1584, using aristocratic safe houses such as that of the Catholic peer Lord Montacute.

Eventually, in September 1593 John Boste was betrayed - though sheltered by Catholic ladies - by a renegade priest at a house near Brancepeth, County Durham. Such was his notoriety from the government's point of view that he was sent on for interrogation by the queen's Privy Council meeting at Windsor, being imprisoned and tortured in the Tower and returned to the north for trial in July 1594. A priest unconcerned with 'temporal' - political - matters, he was executed at Durham by hanging, drawing and was among the English and Welsh martyrs canonised in 1970.