

MARGARET CLITHEROW, LAYWOMAN, YORK, 1586

Margaret Clitherow, born around 1553, was the daughter of the Sheriff of York (1564-5), Thomas Middleton, a candle maker. At the age of 18, she married the butcher and chamberlain of the city, John Clitherow on 8th July, 1571, at St. Martin's on Coney Street. They moved into a house in York Shambles, where she was left predom-

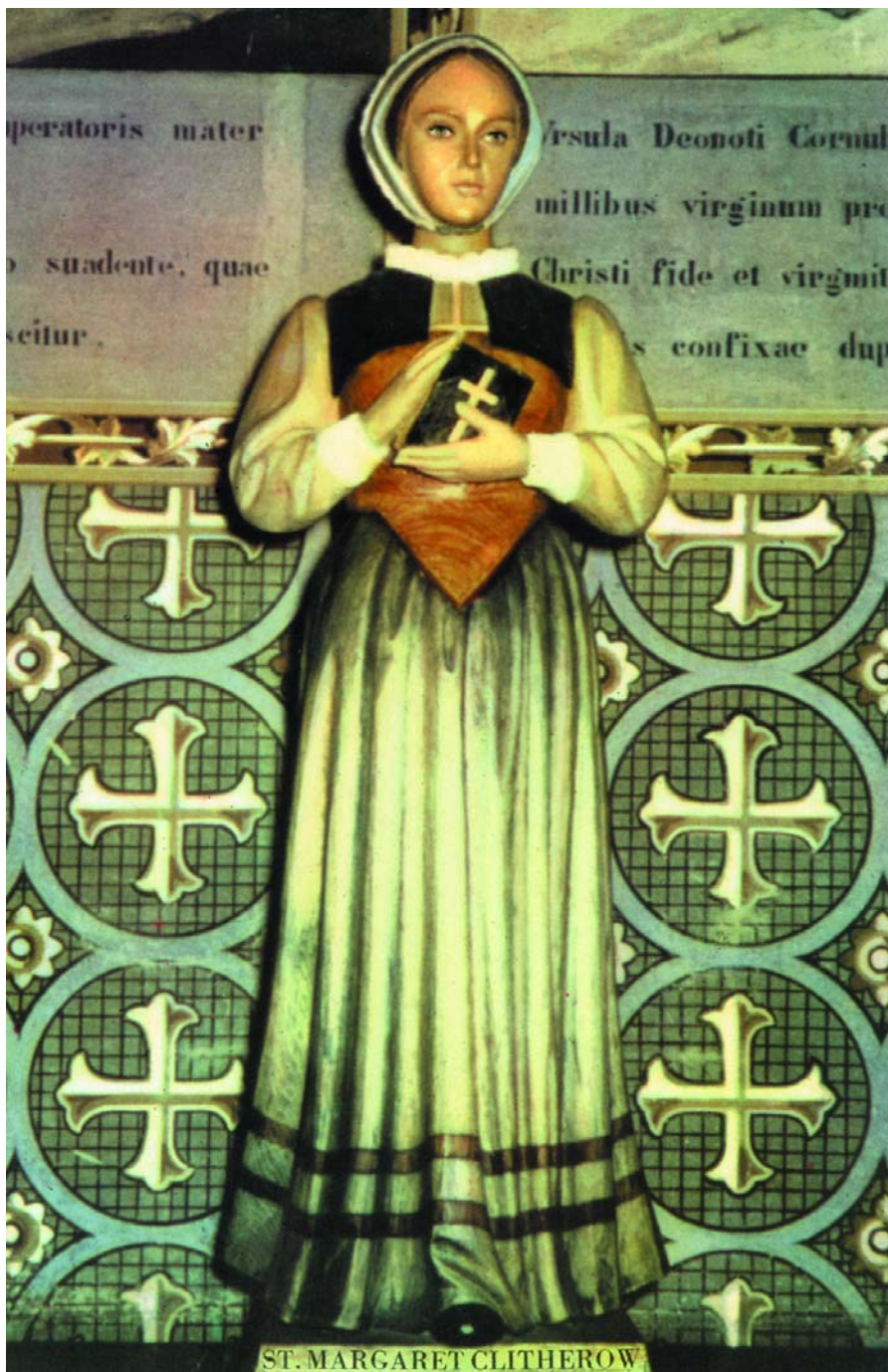
inantly in charge. John was a Protestant but several of his family were recusants and, through them, Margaret began to move in Catholic circles and learn about the faith. Eventually, she converted around 1574, her faith probably bolstered by the return to the city of Fr. John Mush, who it is likely Margaret knew before his ordination. Fr. Mush was Margaret's confessor and would

later write her martyrology. From that day, Margaret became a fervent Catholic.

John already had several children but Margaret cared for them as if they were her own. Her husband was fined repeatedly because she would not attend Protestant services, yet he resolutely stood by her. However, Margaret was vocal in her faith and was eventually imprisoned for two years for not attending the parish church. Despite being confined in a filthy, cold, dark hole, fed meagre rations, and separated from her loved ones, Margaret still cited the time as "a happy and profitable school" since no one could interrupt her fasting or prayers. During this time, Margaret learnt to read and write, helping to teach Catholic children of the area after her release. Throughout, her husband supported her for she was: "a good wife, a tender mother, a kind mistress, loving God above all things and her neighbour as herself."

However, most famous of all was the manner in which she devoted herself and her home to the Catholic cause. Margaret opened her house to harbour priests, including her husband's brother, and it also became a Mass centre. Furthermore, in time, Margaret sent her eldest son to be educated at Douai College on the continent. This last factor led to her being brought in for questioning in 1584, as the authorities desperate to know of her son's whereabouts. Being absent from the country for any serious length of time was interpreted as meaning those involved were Catholics and quite possibly linked to the Mission. Thus, for sending her son abroad, Margaret was confined to her home for a year and a half. However, she continued to make pilgrimages at night to places where Catholic priests had been executed.

John Clitherow remained silent about his wife's activities throughout, possibly demonstrating that he had



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sympathies with the Catholic cause, but in 1586 he was brought in for further questioning about his son's activities on the continent. Whilst he was thus occupied, the authorities went to search the Clitherow's house and a little Flemish boy guided them straight to some vestments and other articles necessary for the saying of Mass. For this allegedly heinous crime, Margaret was imprisoned in York Castle on 10th March, 1586, and interrogated at length by both civic and ecclesiastical authorities but she would not yield to their urgings for her conformity. Her husband and children were imprisoned at various other places in the city, her daughter Anne being particularly poorly treated, despite being only 12 years-

old, for refusing to give information about her mother's activities and continuing to pray in the Catholic manner as she had been taught.

On 14th March, Margaret was charged with treason for having harboured Catholic priests, specifically Fr. John Mush and Fr. Francis Ingleby, and attending Mass. She was arraigned before Judges Clinch and Rhodes, as well as several members of the Council of the North, at the York assizes. However, she refused to enter a plea, saying: "Having made no offence, I need no trial. If you say I have offended, I will be tried by none but by God and your own conscience." Margaret followed this course in the hope of preventing her husband, servants and, particularly,

her children from being brought to the trial to give evidence; as a loving mother, she wanted to spare them such an ordeal. Furthermore, they were the only witnesses against her and she did not want them sharing the guilt of her death. Not entering a plea was itself punishable with death and left the judge with no choice but to pronounce this sentence; despite his qualms about executing a woman, the Council of the North decreed what he must do. The method of execution for refusing to enter a plea was particularly gruesome and outlined by Judge Clinch: "You shall return to the place from whence you came, and in the lower part of the prison be stripped naked, laid down on your back to the ground, and so much weight laid upon you as you are able to bear, and thus you shall continue three days; the third day you shall have a sharp stone put under your back, and your hands and feet shall be tied to posts that, more weight being laid upon you, you may be pressed to death."

Calmly, Margaret accepted the punishment ("God be thanked, I am not worthy of so good a death as this.") and began to prepare a shift for her martyrdom in the hope that she would be spared the embarrassment of being stripped in front of various onlooking men at her ordeal. During her final imprisonment, Margaret was repeatedly urged to conform to save her life or to at least enter a plea but her self-teaching proving excellent and she ably argued against all the ministers who spoke falsely of Catholicism. Further pressure was put on the young lady when it was discovered that she could be pregnant but still Margaret declined to bow to pressure, refusing to inform the judge that she might be pregnant, which could have saved her life. Instead Margaret declared exactly what was happening to her: "I die not desperately nor procure mine own death; for not being found guilty of such crimes as were laid against me, and yet condemned, I could but rejoice – my cause also being God's quarrel. I die for the love of my Lord Jesus."

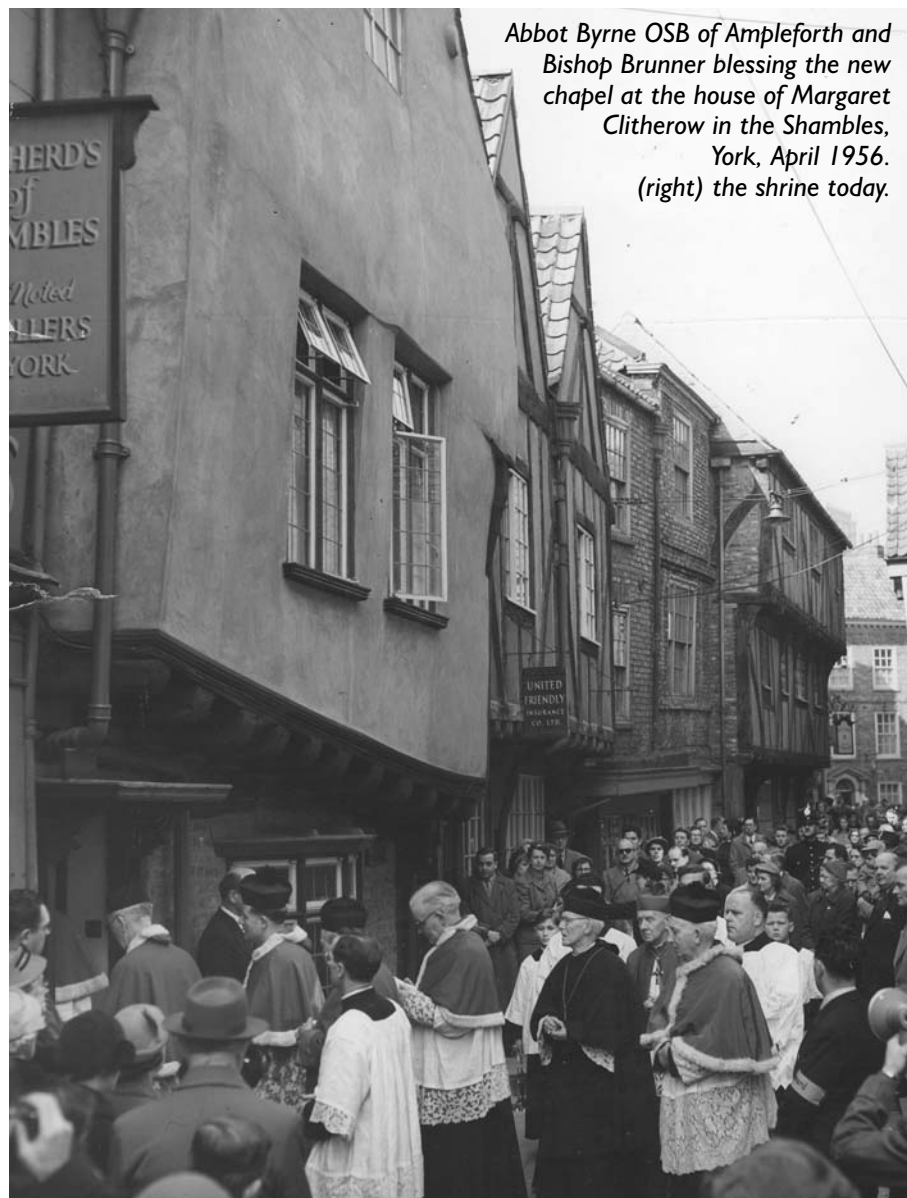
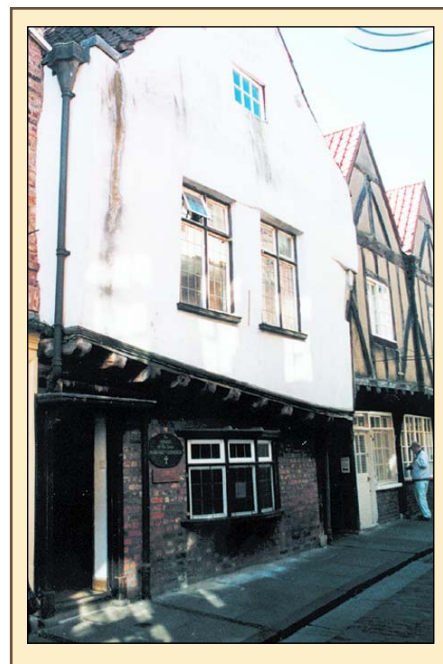
Throughout, she continued to show

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deep love and devotion for her husband and children, often citing her care for them as the reason that she could not enter a plea. Even her stepfather, the mayor of York that year, came to visit her, as well as another clergyman, whom Margaret urged to say no more: “I ground my faith upon Jesus Christ, and by Him I steadfastly believe to be saved, as is taught in the Catholic Church through all Christendom, and promised to remain with her unto the world's end, and hell's gates shall not prevail against it: and by God's assistance I mean to live and die in the same faith; for if an angel come from heaven, and preach any other doctrine than we have received, the Apostle biddeth us

not to believe him. Therefore, if I should follow your doctrine, I should disobey the Apostle's commandment.”

On 25th March, 1586, the dreadful deed was carried out. The night before, Margaret had endured the dark hours with fear but come the hour, her prayers had left her calm and even joyful. She walked barefoot to the Ousebridge toll-booth, having sent her shoes to her daughter Anne so that she could follow in her mother's footsteps. Still the authorities harangued her, telling her to admit she died for treason despite her protestations of loyalty to the queen: “No, no, Mr. Sheriff, I die for the love of my Lord Jesu.” Stripped of even her simple shift, although this was allowed



Abbot Byrne OSB of Ampleforth and Bishop Brunner blessing the new chapel at the house of Margaret Clitherow in the Shambles, York, April 1956. (right) the shrine today.

to partly cover her modesty, Margaret's arms were stretched wide apart in the shape of a cross and tied to poles with cords that she provided. A handkerchief was placed over her face whilst a sharp stone the size of a man's fist was placed directly under her spine in the middle of her back. A door was then placed on top of her and the rocks added by a group of beggars hired for the purpose. As the weight agonisingly built up, Margaret cried out in excruciating pain, “Jesu! Jesu! Jesu! Have mercy on me!” With that, having endured 15 minutes of such suffering, which started at nine o'clock in the morning, her chest gave way and was crushed, her ribs bursting out from under her skin. She was then left in this way for a further six hours to ensure the indignity of her fate.

However, it wasn't the final embarrassment to be heaped upon her. Fr. Mush noted that her remains were buried beside a dunghill in York and were left there for six weeks. Miraculously though, the remains did not begin to putrefy and Catholics eventually collected the incorrupt body parts. Margaret Clitherow's hand is kept in the Monk Bar Convent in York.

Margaret's stepson, William, became a priest, as did her son, Henry, whilst her daughter, Anne, became a nun at St. Ursula's in Louvain.