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3. The ecclesiastical patronage of Oliver Cromwell, c.1654–60¹

Rebecca Warren

Between 1653 and 1658, Oliver Cromwell was the single most powerful ecclesiastical patron in the history of the post-Reformation English Church. When he became Lord Protector in late 1653, all the patronage that had previously been exercised by the recently abolished crown and the episcopalian administration of the Church – making up perhaps forty per cent of the livings in England and Wales – devolved directly into his hands, along with that of numerous other livings that were under sequestration.² And yet, despite the vast extent of this ecclesiastical portfolio and his many other duties as head of state, Cromwell chose not to delegate his ecclesiastical patronage to others, but to exercise it personally up until his death in 1658. Evidence of the scale and nature of his patronage has, hitherto, been buried within the records of clerical appointments that were maintained during the Protectorate but, combined with contemporary comment, it reveals that he not only appointed seven times more clergy than the next most active patron, but also that he presented ministers to benefices in every county of England and Wales.³ Moreover, the breadth of the churchmanship of those clergy whom he chose demonstrates that he adopted a pragmatic approach to recruitment, which outweighed his personal leanings towards independency. The transformation of Britain into a godly state has long

¹ Papers on this subject were given at the University of Portsmouth in 2016 and the University of Oxford in 2017. I am grateful to all those who discussed it with me on both occasions. Cromwell's ecclesiastical patronage is discussed in R. Warren, 'A knowing ministry': the reform of the Church under Oliver Cromwell, c.1653–1660' (unpublished University of Kent PhD thesis, 2017) [later: Warren] and in my *The Interregnum Church in England and Wales, 1649–1660*, currently under preparation.

² For estimates of crown and Church patronage, see R. G. Usher, *The Reconstruction of the English Church* (London, 1910), i. 110–11; D. R. Hirschberg, 'The government and church patronage in England, 1660–1760', *Journal of British Studies*, xx (1980), 111–12.

³ The Trustees for the Maintenance of the Preaching Ministry were the next most active patron, presenting roughly 165 ministers and corroborating the presentations of a further twelve.

R. Warren, 'The ecclesiastical patronage of Oliver Cromwell, c.1654–60', in *Church and people in interregnum Britain*, ed. F. McCall (London, 2021), pp. 65–83. License: CC BY-NC-ND.

been recognised as one of Cromwell's most cherished objectives but, thus far, the extent of his personal input into this process has been more difficult to quantify. Detailed attention has thus focused more upon his political activities than his reforms to the Church. The evidence presented here seeks to rebalance this focus to reflect the importance that Cromwell himself gave to the consistent and considered exercise of his ecclesiastical patronage, placing it at the very heart of his role as Lord Protector.

Ecclesiastical patronage during the revolution has received little scholarly attention.⁴ In part, this reflects the turmoil and confusion of the 1640s and 1650s, decades which experienced unprecedented levels of clerical turnover and substantial disruption to ecclesiastical and legal record-keeping. To this social and administrative turmoil must be added the frequent sales or temporary gifts of advowsons and rights of presentation that took place throughout the early modern period, a practice which, as Rosemary O'Day has noted, 'completely invalidates any estimates of lay and ecclesiastical patronage based on the ownership of advowsons'.⁵ These factors have coalesced to create a perfect storm of research challenges and have hitherto prevented detailed scrutiny of Cromwell's personal role as a patron.⁶ It is, nevertheless, possible to build a relatively robust picture of his activities from the registers of the Commissioners for the Approbation of Public Preachers,

⁴ The subject has received only limited attention across the wider early modern period. The most detailed coverage is found in: R. O'Day, 'Ecclesiastical patronage: who controlled the Church?', in *Church and Society in England: Henry VIII to James I*, ed. F. Heal and R. O'Day (Basingstoke, 1977), pp. 137–55; R. O'Day, 'The law of ecclesiastical patronage in early modern England', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xxvi (1975), 247–60; D. J. Lamburn, 'The influence of the laity in appointments of clergy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century', in *Patronage and Recruitment in the Tudor and Early Stuart Church*, ed. C. Cross (York, 1996), pp. 95–119; C. Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church from Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament* (London, 1971), pp. 50–73. See also F. Heal and C. Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales: 1500–1700* (Basingstoke, 1994), pp. 322–33. For post-1660 patronage, see Hirschberg, 'Church patronage', 109–39. Studies of individual patrons are largely restricted to holders of major political or Church offices: R. O'Day, 'The ecclesiastical patronage of the Lord Keeper, 1558–1642', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, xxiii (1973), 89–109; K. Fincham, 'William Laud and the exercise of Caroline ecclesiastical patronage', *JEH*, li (2000), 69–93.

⁵ R. O'Day, 'Who controlled the Church', p. 153. The best analysis of the legislation that affected patronage in the revolution remains W. Shaw, *A History of the English Church during the Civil Wars and under the Commonwealth, 1640–1660* (2 vols, London, 1900), ii, pp. 263–79. Otherwise scholars must turn to studies of particular patrons or localities, such as Alice MacCampbell's investigation of London patronage: A. MacCampbell, 'Incumbents and patronage in London, 1640–1660', *Journal of Church and State*, xxv (1983), 299–321.

⁶ Exceptions are J. Collins, 'The Church settlement of Oliver Cromwell', *History*, lxxxvii (2002), 18–40, at p. 31; J. Murphy, 'Oliver Cromwell's Church: state and clergy during the Protectorate' (unpublished University of Wisconsin-Madison PhD thesis, 1997), pp. 84–117.

or 'Triers'.⁷ The Triers were established early in 1654 to interview all aspiring clergymen, to ensure that they met acceptable standards of godliness and preaching ability. The names of those ministers whom they approved were entered into a series of registers, along with their intended livings and the names of their patrons. The extent and pattern of Cromwell's patronage is thus embedded within these registers, and from them it is possible to reconstruct something of his personal input into the construction of a preaching ministry after 1654.

Cromwell exercised his patronage formally from the earliest days of his Protectorate but, like other parliamentary grandees, he began informally promoting ministers before his assumption of power.⁸ In November 1653 he had written to Henry Weston, the patron of Speldhurst in Kent, acknowledging his own 'presumption in moving for, and your civility in granting the Advowson of Speldhurst to one Mr. Draper'.⁹ Around the same time, he had sought to persuade Nicholas Bernard, one of his own chaplains, to reject a presentation offered to him by the royalist peer, John Egerton, Second Earl of Bridgewater, for the living at Whitchurch in Shropshire. Writing to Bridgewater after he became Protector, however, he acknowledged the earl's superior right of presentation to the benefice, adding that he would accept Bridgewater's candidate, so long as 'you should intend the reall good of the people in your choyce'. The only condition, he noted, was that Bernard must gain the approval of the newly established Triers in Whitehall.¹⁰ In neither case did Cromwell claim legal authority for his intervention, a fact he openly acknowledged. Nevertheless, his position of power gave his actions a weight that brought them dangerously close to constituting state interference in private patronage.

The bulk of Cromwell's patronage when he became Protector in late 1653 derived from three sources: the livings formerly controlled by the crown and the episcopalian administration of the Church devolved to him via a complex series of transfers between government committees and the Commissioners of the Great Seal that took place during the years of the Commonwealth. The justification for these transfers seems to have derived from the Instrument of Government. Clause III devolved 'writs, processes,

⁷ LPL, COMM. III/3–7.

⁸ These included Sir William Brereton in Cheshire and the Earl of Manchester in East Anglia. Cromwell's first formal presentation in the registers was approved in late April 1654: LPL, COMM. III/3, *lib.1*, fo. 3.

⁹ W. C. Abbott, *The Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (4 vols, Cambridge, Mass., 1945), iii. 120–1.

¹⁰ Huntingdon Library, MS. Ellesmere 8044 [reproduced by kind permission of the Duke of Sutherland].

commissions, patents, grants, and other things' from the Keepers of the Liberty of England (the title that had itself replaced 'Commissioners of the Great Seal') to the Lord Protector.¹¹ Clause XXXI vested delinquents' lands in the Protector's hands.¹² Neither clause referred to ecclesiastical patronage specifically but it may have been deemed that they offered sufficient legislative backing to allow the pragmatic reassignment of these rights.¹³

Cromwell also presented ministers to a third, loosely defined cohort of livings, where either the minister or the patron had been sequestered or ejected as a result of allegations of political, doctrinal or behavioural delinquency.¹⁴ Nearly three-quarters of such livings noted in the registers were subsequently filled by ministers chosen by Cromwell, yet his acquisition of these livings had a complex genesis.¹⁵ In some cases, the presentation right must have devolved to him legally through lapse, but in others the justification seems to have been largely pragmatic, his personal input becoming widely regarded, and used, as a means of settling disputed claims.¹⁶

Overall, the Triers' registers reveal that Cromwell acted as patron in roughly one-third of the approximately 3,500 interviews recorded by the Triers.¹⁷ Since some livings reappeared several times in these registers, this figure equates to nearly forty per cent of the *unique* livings that were entered in the records, and it represents just over ten per cent of all the livings

¹¹ 'Instrument of Government', in S. R. Gardiner, *Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution* (Oxford, 3rd ed., 1906), p. 406; 'Act of this present Parliament for the Alteration of several Names and Forms heretofore used in Courts, Writs, Grants, Patents', in *A&O*, ii. pp. 1262–3.

¹² Gardiner, *Constitutional Documents*, pp. 414–15.

¹³ Shaw, too, struggled to explain the transfer legally: Shaw, *English Church*, ii. 276–8.

¹⁴ Robert Frampton lost his living at Bryngwyn, Monmouthshire, in 1654, when the estates of his patron, the Catholic royalist Marquis of Worcester, were sequestered. Frampton was not himself delinquent: J. Knight, *Civil War and Restoration in Monmouthshire* (Almeley, 2005), pp. 132–3.

¹⁵ This reflects all those livings noted in the registers as 'sequestered'; however, the status of livings was not always recorded by the Triers' clerks, so the total number of sequestered livings that appeared in the registers may have been higher.

¹⁶ The Triers' Ordinance required patrons to present within six months: 'Ordinance for appointing commissioners for approbation of publique preachers', in *A&O*, ii. 857. Legislative backing may have been believed to exist in Clause XXXI of the Instrument of Government but the equation was not straightforward and numerous anomalies can be identified.

¹⁷ This excludes those few livings for which Cromwell corroborated a presentation by a different patron. Although his role was termed both 'patron' and 'nominator', these terms did not always reflect different mechanisms behind his appointments.

Oliver Cromwell's ecclesiastical patronage

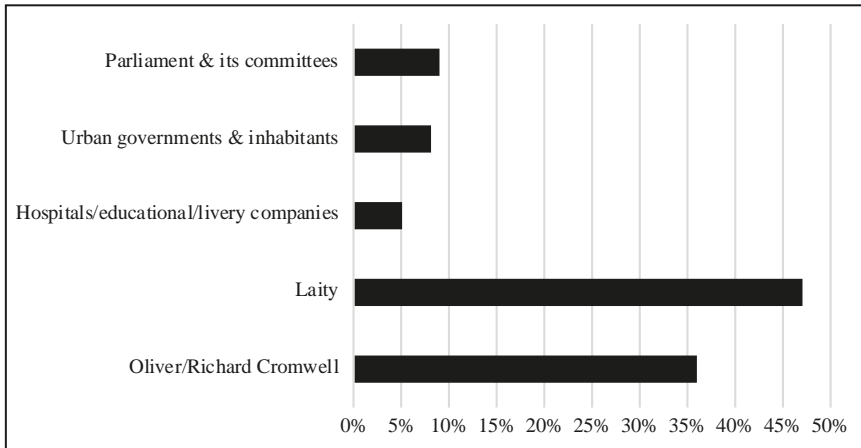


Figure 3.1. Presentations recorded in the Triers' registers by patron type, 1654–60.^a

^a The totals in this chart are approximate and aggregated from a wider range of patrons. Note: The final entry in the registers dates from just before the return of the Rump parliament in May 1659.

in England and Wales.¹⁸ Yet even this enormous amount of patronage did not reflect the theoretical extent of his dominance. The Triers' registers record only those livings for which they approved a new minister, or where an existing minister had applied for a financial augmentation and been approved; livings that did not fall into either category did not appear in the registers.¹⁹ Had Cromwell lived longer, therefore, more ministers would have changed livings and the registers would have shown more parishes for which he was patron; thus, the extent of his theoretical – or unexercised – patronage must have been even greater. Even so, he presented to far more livings than any other class of patron except for the aggregated class of 'lay patrons', none of whom individually controlled more than twenty benefices.

¹⁸ The total number of parishes for which ministers were required is taken here to be approximately 10,000. This figure is above the widely quoted totals of 8–9,000 recorded in some Jacobean surveys, which have not been securely identified as comprehensive and could not take into account the increasing numbers of chapels-of-ease for which the Cromwellian regime sought ministers: BL, MS. Stowe 570/3, fo. 91; BL, Harleian MS. 280/29, fos. 157–72; BL, Lansdowne MS. 459/1; Warren, Appendix. E.

¹⁹ Moreover, recent analysis suggests that perhaps ten per cent of the changes in minister may not appear in the Triers' registers: Warren, "A knowing ministry", p. 152; Welsh livings may have been especially under-recorded; see T. Richards, *Religious Developments in Wales (1654–1662)* (London, 1923), p. 35.

Cromwell used the authority of both his seal manual and the great seal in his patronage but over time he favoured the great seal.²⁰ This trend was particularly evident in his patronage of sequestrations. In 1654, all his presentations to such livings were given under his seal manual, but by 1658 they were all given under the great seal.²¹ This probably reflected the widespread concern about the insecurity of ecclesiastical titles bestowed during the Protectorate; in the eyes of opponents, the perceived illegitimacy of the regime conferred an equal illegitimacy upon presentations made under its authority. Moreover, sequestrated livings were known to be particularly insecure, as the original patron was free to present a new minister if the ejected incumbent died or resigned. Numerous godly ministers who had served sequestrated livings since the 1640s did indeed find themselves suddenly ousted after years of service. Despite the passing of the 'Act for quiet enjoying of Sequestred Parsonages' in 1657, which reinforced the titles of intruded ministers, disputes continued to take place.²²

In any case, Cromwell's patronage of sequestrations was often temporary. In March 1655, for example, he presented John Bird to Bulmer in Essex, where the original patron, Nicholas Daniell, was under sequestration for recusancy. Nine years before, in 1646, the elderly incumbent John Donnel had died and been replaced by John Chamberlain, presented by Thomas Bayles, who had acquired the right of presentation. Yet when Chamberlain left Bulmer in 1655, it was Cromwell who stepped in to present Bird, presumably on the basis of Daniell's sequestration. When Bird left the living in 1658, however, it was Thomas Bayles who presented his successor, Thomas Bernard; probably Chamberlain had resigned the living or died, an event which returned the patronage to the patron.²³

Nominating ministers for sequestrated livings was the only mechanism through which Cromwell routinely expropriated private patronage, which otherwise continued to operate unmodified throughout the interregnum, wherever the patron was not judged delinquent. There were a number of other occasions, however, when he became involved in the exercise of

²⁰ Fifty-five per cent of his presentations were under the great seal, forty-five per cent under his seal manual and for five per cent, no seal was recorded.

²¹ The great seal was also used in a small number of other presentations, including some from private patrons, for example: LPL, COMM. III/4, fo. 562 (Runwell).

²² 'Act for the quiet enjoying of sequestered Parsonages and Vicarages by the present Incumbent' (1657), in *A&O*, ii. 1266–7. See, for example, Edward Fletcher's disputes at Bagenden in 1658: TNA, SP 18/183, fo. 209.

²³ LPL, COMM. III/4, fo. 193; LPL, COMM. III/7, fo. 140; H. Smith, *The Ecclesiastical History of Essex under the Long Parliament and Commonwealth* (Colchester, n.d.), p. 297; *WR*, p. 147. Death or resignation of the sequestrated incumbent returned the patronage to the original patron, if not him/herself under sequestration.

private patronage through his corroboration of presentations. Most of these instances were in response to disputes over titles, indicating that he was aware of the frequent legal challenges to intruded ministers from their ejected predecessors. In 1657 he stepped into the fraught situation at Great Rissington in Gloucestershire, where the royalist patron, Sir Edmund Bray, had already failed to gain the Triers' approval for two ministers whom he had recently presented. Cromwell presented Abraham Drye under his seal manual, an act which antagonized Bray further. Drye's situation must have become so awkward that some months later he petitioned Cromwell for additional support, since he subsequently reappears in the registers with a second presentation from the Protector for Great Rissington, this time given under the great seal.²⁴

Cromwell's right to present to Church and crown livings, however, especially using his seal manual, was never universally accepted and even after his death his actions continued to be challenged. In November 1659, Timothy Baldwin petitioned the Commissioners of the Great Seal for the rectory of Llandrillo, Denbighshire, noting,

Now in regard that some doubt had ben made of grants of this nature made in the tyme of the said lord protector your petitioner humbly desires your lordshipp to give unto your petitioner a grant of the said rectory under the present greate seale.²⁵

Moreover, in April 1660, on the eve of the Restoration, Philip Nye, one of the Triers, showed the Commissioners of the Great Seal a legal judgement in support of John Loder's claim to the disputed living of St Bartholomews Exchange in London, to which he had been presented by Cromwell in 1656. The judgement accredited the Protector's seal manual with equal authority in such matters to that of the Great Seal, '... but the Lords Commissioners denied it and said the Protector could not dispose of that, which was their right to bestowe And that Mr Loder's title ... was voyde ...'²⁶

Besides demonstrating the uneasiness over Cromwell's use of his seal manual and a preference for the authority of the great seal, the commissioners' denial of his right to present to the living suggests also that the original transfer of ecclesiastical patronage from the commissioners to the Protector had been neither smooth nor, indeed, clear cut.

²⁴ Walker, *Attempt*, p. 174; TNA, SP 29/440, fo. 129; TNA, SP 29/36, fos. 87, 90; LPL, COMM. III/6, fos. 37, 174; TNA, SP 29/36, fo. 90.

²⁵ BL Add. MS. 36792, fo. 1. Note: the rectory was separate from the vicarage of Llandrillo.

²⁶ *The Vestry Minute Books of the Parish of St Bartholomew Exchange in the City of London 1567–1676*, ed. E. Freshfield (London, 1890), pp. 73–4. St Bartholomews had been a crown living; Shaw, *English Church*, ii. p. 268.

Cromwell presented ministers in every county of England and Wales. Numerically, most of these were in the south-east, south-west and east of the country but, as a percentage of those settled by the Triers, his input was greatest in London, the north-west and the north-east. Critically, however, the Cromwellian regime did not operate a policy of emptying pulpits to allow the Protector or any other patron to intrude new clergy. Only where ministers were found to be delinquent at a hearing did the County Ejection Commissions remove them from their parishes, and by no means all hearings resulted in ejection.²⁷ In fact, the total number of ejections during the Protectorate was low, probably only two to three hundred.²⁸ Thus the geographical occurrences of Cromwell's presentations were essentially random, influenced by the number and location of former crown and Church livings and of sequestrations, and by the number of times individual benefices changed hands. In London, for example, he was a major patron, making thirty-one presentations to twenty-six livings. Only three of these were to sequestrations, but twenty-one of the twenty-six had been in the gift of the crown or Church before the Civil Wars. Elsewhere, however, the proportions were strikingly different. In Essex roughly a quarter of his presentations were to livings where the former incumbent was recorded in the registers as ejected or sequestered; in Norfolk the proportion was a third, yet in Cumberland none of his presentations were to sequestrations.²⁹ Thus the distribution of his patronage was highly variable and this defeats attempts at rationalization on geographic grounds.

Cromwell remained an active ecclesiastical patron throughout his Protectorate. Even in the last year of his life, beset by impending financial catastrophe, his own poor health and the death of his favourite daughter, he still made 160 presentations over just eight months, a quarter of all the appointments approved by the Triers in 1658.³⁰ His greatest input, however, was in 1656, when forty-five per cent of the Triers' approvals were

²⁷ Local hostility may also have driven some ministers from their livings, but such instances were not at the instigation of the regime.

²⁸ The total number of ejections throughout the revolution has been variously calculated at between roughly 2,500 and 3,600: I. Green, 'The persecution of "scandalous" and "malignant" parish clergy during the English Civil War', *EHR*, xciv (1979), 507–31, at p. 508; R. Bosher, *The Making of the Restoration Settlement, 1649–1662* (London, 1951), p. 5.

²⁹ But note: the registers did not always record the sequestration or ejection of an incumbent. Further research suggests that in Essex, for example, the figure may be closer to one-half than one-quarter. Moreover, some sequestered livings had also been in the gift of the crown or Church, so multiple factors may have accounted for Cromwell's acquisition of some livings.

³⁰ It is likely, of course, that some of his presentations were made by his close associates at times of personal crisis.

of presentations made by him. This was almost certainly a consequence of the royalist uprisings of 1655, which culminated with Penruddock's rebellion in the south-west of England. The resulting clampdown on known or suspected rebels included new legislation against royalist clergy, which triggered the ejection of a considerable number of ministers from their livings. Moreover, it involved the identification and sequestration of other political delinquents, some of whom were also ecclesiastical patrons.³¹ This resulted in an increase in the turnover of livings, for many of which Cromwell nominated a replacement minister. The peak in his patronage months later, in 1656, reflects the time lapse between the political turmoil and the consequent legislation and its effects, followed by the slow process of identifying, presenting and approving suitable clergy.

The sheer extent of Cromwell's ecclesiastical patronage alongside his numerous other duties begs the question of the extent of his personal participation in the process. How closely involved was he in the exercise of his patronage? And what mechanisms underpinned his identification and choice of ministers? There is surprisingly little direct testimony of his role in individual appointments, but it seems very likely that he was heavily reliant upon others to locate suitable ministers on his behalf. Chief among these scouts must have been the loose group of personal chaplains who surrounded him, not only leading churchmen such as John Owen and Thomas Manton, but also lesser-known ministers, among whom were Nicholas Bernard and William Hooke. Representing a range of denominational sympathies, these men had connections across the spectrum of godly practice and, crucially, within the universities.³² It is probable that, like Charles I before him, Cromwell expected them to bring aspiring ministers to his attention when necessary. Certainly, he often asked them for informal judgements on ministers awaiting his approval. Thomas Manton and Jeremiah White both interviewed the previously ejected minister Peter Samways, when he petitioned Cromwell for re-admittance to the Church in 1658, reporting back that he was 'of unquestionable abilities' and 'very great merit'.³³

More formally, Cromwell responded to personal petitions from parochial congregations in need of a minister. In April 1654, the parishioners of Mashbury in Essex asked him to present Abraham Pinchbecke, 'whom [your petitioners] had unanimously made choyce of' after a vacancy of two years.

³¹ *AcO*, ii. 1025–6; TNA, SP 18/100, fos. 310–311.

³² Owen was an independent, Manton a Presbyterian, Bernard a protégé of James Ussher, archbishop of Armagh and espoused a similar openness towards 'reduced episcopacy'; Hooke had spent some years in New England and another of his chaplains was the Baptist Daniel Dike.

³³ TNA, SP 18/182, fos. 8v, 11.

He complied with their request.³⁴ Shortly after that, he agreed to present John Firth to Mansfield, in response to a similar petition from the inhabitants of the town which, they claimed, had been without a minister 'by the space of five years and upwards'.³⁵ Occasionally, he instructed parishioners to find a suitable minister themselves, as he did at Maidstone, where he offered the congregation 'the liberty to spy out a man fit for them'.³⁶

Cromwell also stepped in to support the parishioners of Brickhill in Buckinghamshire, where the right to present to the living had been contested since 1653 by the hereditary patron, John Duncomb and George Cockayn, who held a grant of next presentation. While both men argued, the parishioners had chosen themselves a new minister, Matthew Mead, on whose behalf they successfully petitioned Cromwell for a formal presentation, pointing out that the living had briefly lapsed to the Commissioners of the Great Seal and thus that it had devolved to him. Even so, the dispute over the patronage dragged wearily through the civil courts for several years until finally Cromwell ordered the hereditary patron, John Duncomb, to hand over his presentation, allegedly saying that he would otherwise 'make him the poorest Duncomb that ever was in England and that he would make Brickhill too hot for him'.³⁷ Not surprisingly, Duncomb finally complied and Cromwell was recorded in the registers as Mead's patron for Brickhill.³⁸

Not all of the petitions Cromwell received, however, resulted in his compliance. In October 1654, some of the parishioners of St Botolph's Without Bishopsgate, London, sent in a petition requesting an interim minister while the existing incumbent, John Simpson, was under investigation for delinquency.³⁹ Shortly afterwards, Daniel Nichols was installed with Cromwell's confirmation, but this move divided the parish, prompting a counter-petition in favour of a different candidate, Samuel Lee. In response, a third faction within the parish petitioned Cromwell, requesting that either Simpson or Nichols be retained instead of Lee. Although Lee was known to be unwilling to take up the position, Cromwell personally persuaded him to accept it, a move which must have infuriated a number of the parishioners.⁴⁰

³⁴ TNA, SP 18/70, fo. 80; LPL, COMM. III/3, *lib.1*, fo. 42.

³⁵ TNA, SP 18/73, fos. 61, 63; LPL, COMM. III/3, *lib.1*, fo. 41.

³⁶ *Calendar of the Correspondence of Richard Baxter* (Oxford, 1991), ed. N. H. Keble and G. F. Nuttall (2 vols), i. 136–7 (letter 177).

³⁷ WMS C4.39.

³⁸ LPL, COMM. III/4, fo. 146.

³⁹ Simpson was a radical Fifth Monarchist, at this point in opposition to Cromwell.

⁴⁰ TNA, SP 25/92, fos. 51, 77; TNA, SP 18/99, fo. 194.

The conclusion from Brickhill and St Botolphs Without Bishopsgate is that Cromwell was not above using the authority of his political position to intervene in disputes and bring about the resolution that he thought right. Nevertheless, his involvement in these cases, and that at Whitchurch in 1654, highlights a paradox in his role as an ecclesiastical patron.⁴¹ Where he felt that the needs of congregations were suffering as a result of disagreements over patronage, he was at times prepared to act over and above the disputing parties to achieve a settlement. On the other hand, he also sought consistently to work within the legal framework governing clerical appointments. Having presented Matthew Mead to Brickhill, for example, he did not try to override the legal caveats entered by Duncomb and Cockayn against Mead's claim to the living, which left the latter with a valid presentation but without the necessary Instrument of Approval, until Duncomb finally withdrew his presentation – a move which, eventually, Cromwell had to precipitate.⁴² Cromwell also insisted that those clergy, such as James Potter, whom he approved personally as fit to re-enter the ministry after an earlier sequestration, must, nevertheless, also satisfy the Triers.⁴³

Petitioning was a tried and tested means for congregations to influence the choice of incumbent for their parish but if the process was unexceptional, the degree of Cromwell's personal engagement in this process was not. In 1657, Marchmont Nedham, the newspaper editor and political commentator, noted of Cromwell's presentations that,

He seldom bestoweth any of them upon any man whom himself doth not first examine and make trial of in person; save only that at such times as his great affaires happen to be more urgent than ordinary, he useth to appoint some other to do it on his behalf.⁴⁴

Nedham's comment was part of a flattering justification of the Protector's religious programme and must be understood within this context, but his point about Cromwell interviewing his candidates is not without corroboration. A year or so earlier, Sebastian Pitfield, minister of Caundle Marsh in Dorset, tried to arrange for a fellow minister, whom Cromwell was presenting to a nearby living, to be examined locally in Dorset rather than London. Writing to a colleague about it, Pitfield noted that his request

⁴¹ For Whitchurch, see p. 120 above.

⁴² WMS C4.38–9.

⁴³ TNA, SP 18/77, fo. 75; TNA, SP 25/75, fo. 607.

⁴⁴ M. Nedham, *The Great Accuser Cast Down* (London, 1657), p. 103.

was 'a favour of the largest size ... it is his Highnesses custom to examine whom he presents himself, before he presents them'.⁴⁵

This comment supports Nedham's assertion. And indeed, Cromwell's willingness to become personally involved in other parochial matters suggests that such a practice would have been in keeping with his character. In 1654, for example, he personally requested that a number of parishes in East Anglia supply him with detailed information on their individual circumstances, in response to an earlier petition they had submitted exposing their 'low estate'.⁴⁶ There is also extensive evidence of his direct role in approving augmentations to parochial incomes to ensure that parishes were not deprived of the word of God through their own poverty.⁴⁷

The Triers' registers show that Cromwell presented between 150 and 300 ministers in each year of his Protectorate.⁴⁸ If he interviewed most of those whom he presented, even allowing for some delegation when necessary, this constituted a very significant workload. Thus in 1656, his busiest year as a patron, he presented nearly 300 ministers, which meant (hypothetically) one man on every working day for eleven months and two men every working day of the final month.⁴⁹ While some presentations may have involved only a brief reading of a petition and personal recommendations, his own conscience and natural verbosity may have meant that those whom he interviewed in person found themselves in his company for much longer.⁵⁰

Cromwell's close involvement in his presentations may be corroborated by a letter that he received from a minister following up queries that had arisen during a mutual conversation. The writer elaborated on his conversion experience and then his certainty about the nature of his vocation: 'I study not for wordes or formes, or ostentation of learning, but to divide

⁴⁵ Letter from Sebastian Pitfield, undated and now lost, quoted in A. Bayley, *The Great Civil War in Dorset, 1642–1660* (Taunton, 1910), p. 439.

⁴⁶ J. Nickolls, *Original Letters and Papers of State Addressed to Oliver Cromwell* (London, 1743), pp. 155–9.

⁴⁷ Cromwell personally approved many augmentations, and indeed his input at some Council meetings seems restricted to making such approvals: see TNA, SP18/126, fos. 6 (13), 311 (3); TNA, SP 25/114, fo. 83 (2, 3). See also TNA, SP 25/78, fo. 858 for his intervention in the dispute between John Wells and George Hopkins in Worcestershire.

⁴⁸ Note: these figures reflect the numbers and dates of the Triers' approvals, not the date when Cromwell bestowed his presentations, which was rarely recorded. Where his presentation dates *were* recorded, however, the majority of his ministers were presented and approved on the same day.

⁴⁹ The actual intervals between his presentations are not known.

⁵⁰ The minister Richard Baxter noted witheringly on several occasions Cromwell's 'slow and tedious' speaking: R. Baxter and M. Sylvester, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (London, 1696), lib. 2, p. 205 (58).

the word aright, so as it may bring most glory to God, and edification to his people.' He added that he recognized God's providence in placing Cromwell in power and that both he and his parishioners had subscribed their allegiance to him. He concluded with a detailed explanation of the various scriptural interpretations of the apostle Peter's phrase, 'To the answer of a good conscience towards God, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.'⁵¹ It seems likely, perhaps probable, that this letter was sent by one of those ministers interviewed by Cromwell prior to receiving his presentation, continuing or confirming points raised in conversation between them. The topics covered – proof of his conversion experience and his pastoral vocation, his political loyalty, and his understanding of, and familiarity with, the scriptures – suggest that this encounter had been an interview, rather than simply a debate. These matters were also similar to the questions asked by the Triers at their own ministerial interviews and imply that the correspondent had been subjected to a fairly lengthy and searching examination by Cromwell.⁵²

It was widely believed by Cromwell's opponents that his regime favoured the appointment of Independents, especially to wealthier livings.⁵³ In 1660, Seymour Bowman recorded the views of a fellow MP, Sir Thomas Meeres, who, 'moved against the Tryers at Whitehall who put in persons of Anabaptisticall principalls sayinge that they would put in anybody into mean livings but none but those of their own humour into a great one'.⁵⁴

The accusation that the Cromwellian regime gave rich livings only to men of 'Anabaptisticall principalls' – a term often used scathingly for all forms of independency – is not supported by the evidence, although such pairings did occur sometimes. In 1657, Cromwell backed John Robotham's move to the living of Upminster in Essex, worth £130 *pa.* Robotham moved

⁵¹ The letter is anonymous and undated: Nickolls, *Original Letters*, pp. 152–3; Murphy, *Oliver Cromwell's Church*, p. 93.

⁵² A. Sadler, *Inquisitio Anglicana* (London, 1654), pp. 8, 11–13; WMS C1.327; Walker, *Attempt*, pp. 172–5. It should be noted that the few records of actual Triers' interviews were all written by those whom they rejected, so the Triers' questions in these reports are perhaps unusually dominated by the concerns the interviewed ministers aroused, such as signs of Arminianism.

⁵³ 'Independents' here is used broadly for those men called elsewhere both Independents and/or Congregationalists, who sought the essential autonomy of the congregation, while accepting *or* rejecting membership of a national Church. The precise terminology for such men was contested, then as now. For a helpful recent discussion, see J. Halcomb, 'A social history of congregational religious practice during the puritan revolution' (unpublished University of Cambridge PhD thesis, 2009).

⁵⁴ Diary of the proceedings of the House of Commons [by Seymour Bowman], 18 June–18 Aug., 1660: Bod., Dep. f. 9, fo. 104.

within Cromwellian circles, as an army chaplain and preaching assistant to the Independent minister, Joseph Caryl, one of the Triers, and he had been a member of an Independent congregation in Stepney in 1656.⁵⁵ Cromwell also presented another Independent, Theophilus Polwhele, to one portion, worth £280 *pa*, of the rich living of Tiverton in Devon, and he presented Matthew Mead to Brickhill, worth £130 *pa*, but the majority of his presentations were to livings whose values were considerably less than the £100 *pa* that parliament had deemed to be an adequate ministerial income in 1649.⁵⁶

In fact, Cromwell presented Independents to some remarkably impoverished benefices too. One such was Samuel Alexander who, in 1654, was given the sequestration of Stanfield in Norfolk, valued three years later at only £25 *pa*.⁵⁷ Almost immediately, the parishioners of neighbouring Godwick, which had no minister, decided to join themselves to his congregation and begged money from the Council of State in order to retain him. He was finally granted a £10 augmentation in 1657.⁵⁸ Woodborough in Wiltshire, to which Cromwell presented Isaac Chauncy, and Rothwell in Northamptonshire, to which he presented John Beverley, were also poor; both were impropriated livings, the former offering a ministerial salary of £6 *pa*, the latter £6, 13s, 4d, although here, at least theoretically, Beverley was granted a modest augmentation around the time of his appointment.⁵⁹

Yet the Protector also presented Presbyterian ministers to livings offering an equally diverse range of values: in Essex alone, he gave the impropriated living of Bulmer to John Bird in 1655, where in 1650 it had been noted that the incumbent was currently receiving £16 *pa*, and in 1658 he presented John Smith to Rickling, which had an income of £28 *pa*, and had been unserved for the last seven years, 'the lyving being so small that noe man would accept thereof'.⁶⁰ In 1656, however, he had presented Francis Chandler to Theydon Garnon, offering £170 *pa* in 1650 and Martin Alderson to Latchingdon, worth £159 *pa*.⁶¹ Further north, in Huntingdonshire, he presented another

⁵⁵ S. Wright, 'John Robotham', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/23896>>.

⁵⁶ 'Act for Maintenance for Preaching Ministers, and other Pious Uses', in *A&O*, ii. 142–8.

⁵⁷ LPL, COMM. XIIa/20, fo. 9.

⁵⁸ Nickolls, *Original Letters*, p. 159; TNA, SP 25/78, fo. 375.

⁵⁹ TNA, SP 25/77, fo. 437. This augmentation seems to have been reduced from the £30 *pa* granted in 1656.

⁶⁰ LPL, COMM. XIIa/8, fos. 455–456.

⁶¹ Chandler participated in the Presbyterian ordination of Edmund Calamy the younger in 1658: Smith, *Essex*, pp. 367–8; Alderson was named a member of the 8th Essex *classis* in 1648: Shaw, *English Church*, ii. 383.

Presbyterian, James Bedford, to Bluntsham-cum-Earith, worth £180 *pa.* The evidence suggests, then, that Cromwell settled both Independent and Presbyterian ministers in wealthy livings, a practice which did not prevent later critics from cherry-picking a few examples on which to base a legacy of unsubstantiated complaint.

The Triers' registers demonstrate, in fact, that Cromwell and his regime appointed men from across the orthodox godly spectrum. Indeed, roughly ninety per cent of the ministers presented by the Protector espoused, or at least leant towards, Presbyterianism, or fell into Richard Baxter's category of 'dis-engaged, faithful men', unaligned to any clearly identified denomination.⁶² Just under five per cent are currently identified as having been Independents. These figures are in line with the overall proportions of appointments to the Cromwellian Church; of the c.3,500 ministers approved by the Triers, only two per cent have been securely identified as Independents.⁶³ On the other hand, Cromwell was personally responsible for presenting sixty-five per cent of all the Independent ministers approved by the Triers.⁶⁴ It is unclear whether this reflected a deliberate policy of favour or whether the vast extent of his patronage simply gave him many more opportunities to present Independents than any other patron. Indeed, it may be that his own Independent sympathies encouraged a higher proportion of ministers who shared his outlook to ask for his support. No doubt his belief that essential godliness was more important than minor differences in its form and practice underpinned the breadth of his sponsorship but even had he wished to promote only Independents, the small number of such men available would have made this impossible.

Intriguingly, approximately five per cent of the ministers presented by Cromwell were men who chose to undergo illegal episcopalian ordination after the abolition of the bishops in 1646, although only a third of these did so *before* he presented them.⁶⁵ Cromwell's regime must have been aware that such ordinations were still taking place – after the Restoration,

⁶² These men are suggested by A. G. Matthews to have been 'Presbyterians, or ordained by presbyters though not convincingly of that persuasion' and 'political presbyterians', who eschewed rigid categorization: *CR*, pp. x, lxvii; Baxter, *Reliquiae*, lib. 1, p. 148.

⁶³ These percentages have been calculated using A. G. Matthews's identification of 'congregationalists' in 1662, although more probably remain unrecognized: *WR*, *CR*, p. lxvii. See also n.56 above. The Triers Commission at its inception in March 1654 comprised eighteen Independent ministers, fourteen Presbyterian, Baptist or unaligned ministers and six men who were not ministers, at least two of whom were Independents.

⁶⁴ One of these, John Skynner, was a Baptist: LPL, COMM. III/4, fo. 554; *WR*, *CR*, p. 444.

⁶⁵ The identification of post-1646 to 1660 episcopal ordinations comes from a draft list drawn up by S. Taylor and K. Fincham; it is likely that more remain unidentified.

Robert Skinner, former bishop of Oxford, claimed to have ordained several hundred ministers at his house close to the city – but whether the identities of individual ministers were known is unclear.⁶⁶ Cromwell had investigated some degree of accommodation for moderate episcopalians within the godly Church in the early 1650s although, when the Instrument of Government was issued at the outset of the Protectorate, it had specifically prohibited those practising ‘prelacy’ from benefiting from the state’s protection.⁶⁷

In fact, Cromwell’s approach to episcopalians remained pragmatic, generally avoiding outright confrontation except in circumstances where they were believed to be a threat to the security of the regime.⁶⁸ Did he know that some of those whom he presented had been ordained by former bishops? It seems unlikely. Most of these men were evidently minor clergymen with obscure referees, who may have stayed below the radar of the authorities in Whitehall. One or two, however, moved in more august circles but these men were able to call on the support of some impeccably godly referees. John Houseman, presented by Cromwell to Great Thurlow in Suffolk in 1656, was secretly ordained in Norwich in 1651 by Robert Maxwell, former bishop of Kilmore in Ireland. Yet Houseman provided nine testimonials at his interview, including three from prominent Presbyterian Cambridge academics, John Arrowsmith, Anthony Tuckney and Lazarus Seaman, the first two of whom were themselves members of the Triers’ Commission in Whitehall.⁶⁹

In some cases, Cromwell chose to present men of similar religious views to those of their predecessors for his livings, but it seems unlikely that this was a deliberate policy. Throughout the Protectorate there were more empty benefices than available ministers and an overwhelming ratio of Presbyterian or unaligned ministers to Independents. Thus it was inevitable that he would often present Presbyterians to livings formerly served by Presbyterians. Yet there were, of course, instances when Cromwell sponsored Independents in

⁶⁶ K. Fincham and S. Taylor, ‘Vital statistics: episcopal ordination and ordinands in England, 1646–60’, *EHR*, cxxvi (2011), 319–44, at p. 332.

⁶⁷ Ralph Brownrigg later told William Sancroft, future archbishop of Canterbury, that talks were faltering owing to Presbyterian recalcitrance, although ‘the Independents are of a more moderate disposition’: H. Carey, *Memorials of the Great Civil War in England from 1646 to 1652* (2 vols, London, 1842), ii. 415; Boshier, *Restoration Settlement*, pp. 9–10; Gardiner, *Constitutional Documents*, p. 416.

⁶⁸ The royalist uprisings of 1655, for example, resulted in a clampdown on episcopalian clergy: *Orders of the Protector and Council for Securing the Peace of the Commonwealth* (1655) in TNA, SP 18/100, fos. 310–11.

⁶⁹ LPL, COMM. III/5, fo. 20. Arrowsmith was Master of Trinity College from 1653; Tuckney, Master of St Johns; Seaman, Master of Peterhouse from 1644 and Vice-Chancellor of the university in 1653–4.

succession. In early 1656, he presented Nathaniel Mather, one of a number of Independent ministers recently returned from New England, to the sequestration of Harberton in Devon. When Mather moved to Barnstaple a year later, Cromwell presented another Independent, George Mortimer, to Harberton.⁷⁰ In 1655, however, he had presented Nathaniel's brother Samuel, also an Independent, to Gravesend, but when Samuel did not take up the living, Cromwell presented a Presbyterian, Philip Sharpe, shortly afterwards.⁷¹

Moreover, Cromwell sometimes deliberately overruled a congregation's choice of minister. In 1654 he rejected Richard Henchman, nominated by the parishioners of Christchurch in London, in favour of Seth Wood, a young Independent whom he sponsored several times during his Protectorate.⁷² Henchman's mild Presbyterianism was perhaps tinged with episcopalian sympathies, which may have contributed to Cromwell's preference for Wood.⁷³ It would appear, then, that Cromwell could not, and did not, operate a strict policy of copying denominational loyalties within livings; and indeed, a rigorous segregation along such lines would have sat uneasily with his personal tolerance of godly diversity and his drive for godly unity.

Cromwell's patronage record reveals the existence of a number of loose clerical networks that provided support for each other when seeking appointments in the Church and who benefitted from his favour. One of these comprised Independent ministers who had recently returned from New England, men such as Isaac Chauncey and the Mather brothers, Nathaniel and Samuel, who discovered 'what an advantage to preferment it is to have been a New English man'.⁷⁴ Cromwell presented at least eight 'New England men' to livings, including Edward Fletcher, who was also able to call upon another network of Independents favoured by Cromwell. Based largely in Gloucestershire, this group included William Tray, William Becket, Simon Moore, Carnsew Helme and Stephen Ford, all of whom he presented during the 1650s and who provided each other with references for their 'Triers' interviews, alongside several other local Independents.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ LPL, COMM. III/4, fo. 563; LPL, COMM. III/6, fo. 184.

⁷¹ Mather was in Ireland at the time: LPL, COMM. III/3, *lib.* 3, fo. 139; LPL, COMM. III/4, fo. 133.

⁷² LPL, COMM. III/3, *lib.* 2, fo. 158.

⁷³ Henchman was nephew of Humphrey Henchman, future bishop of Salisbury, and conformed to the restored episcopalian Church in 1662.

⁷⁴ N. Mather to J. Rogers, 23 Dec. 1650/1 in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, (1868), 4th series, viii. 5.

⁷⁵ Eg, LPL, COMM. III/6, fo. 49 (Buckland), LPL, COMM. III/4, fo. 374 (Oddington).

Similar Presbyterian networks also existed. Simeon Ashe and Edmund Calamy, for example, worked continuously together providing references for Presbyterian ministers, men such as Thomas Case. When Cromwell presented Case to St Giles in the Fields in London, Calamy and Ashe provided him with testimonials alongside the Presbyterian ministers Elidad Blackwell, George Smallwood and John Webb.⁷⁶ The previous year Case, Calamy, Ashe and Smallwood had all signed Simon Patrick's Presbyterian ordination certificate and frequently acted together to promote their colleagues within the Cromwellian Church, many of them benefiting from the Protector's patronage.⁷⁷ Such networks of men reappear throughout the 'Triers' registers, and probably provided another means by which potential ministers may have come to Cromwell's attention other than through his chaplains.⁷⁸

Cromwell's participation in the exercise of his ecclesiastical patronage indicates that, for him, the transformation of Britain into a godly nation was not a distant aspiration but a daily activity, an ongoing process which required and received constant attention. Moreover, his close engagement with the construction of a preaching ministry was a personal crusade: the ministry was the means through which he could achieve his overriding objective – the unity of the godly. In 1655, he had railed at MPs for not

settling of such matters in things of religion as would have upheld and given countenance to a godly ministry, and yet would have given a just liberty to godly men of different judgements, though men of the same faith with them that you call the orthodox ministry in England – as it is well known the independents are, and many under the form of baptism, who are sound in the faith only may perhaps be different in judgement in some lesser matters ...⁷⁹

Analysis of his work as an ecclesiastical patron demonstrates that this principle was one upon which he acted throughout his Protectorate in carrying out his duties as an ecclesiastical patron. After all, verifying the orthodoxy and suitability of those whom he presented could have been left to the judgement of his chaplains and the Triers, yet he chose to devote his

⁷⁶ LPL, COMM. III/3, *lib.* 2, fo. 252. Calamy, Ashe and Blackwell were members of the 12th London *Classis*, Webb belonged to the 2nd Essex *Classis* and Smallwood was minister of St Mildreds, Poultry, in the 6th London *Classis* where Calamy was a *classis* Trier.

⁷⁷ Bod, MS. Tanner 52, fo. 6.

⁷⁸ Such networks existed beyond London: in Sussex, Francis Cheynell, John Tredcroft, George Vinter, John Chatfield and Robert Fish frequently supported each other, Vinter Fish and John Tredcroft offering testimonials for Tredcroft's relation, Nathaniel, when Cromwell presented him to Horsham in 1657: LPL, COMM. III/6, fo. 126.

⁷⁹ Abbott, *Writings of Oliver Cromwell*, iii. 586.

own time to ensuring that his presentees were worthy of the responsibility laid upon them. At the same time, his commitment also signalled his proactive response to a national ministry in crisis. During 1653, parliament had received petitions from several counties begging for support for the ailing national Church.⁸⁰ There was widespread concern at the number of livings without incumbents or subject to rapid clerical turnover, situations aggravated by the collapse of the mechanisms for appointing new clergy. Thus his engagement in settling ministers must have served both his spiritual conscience and the political and personal imperative of improving parochial provision. The judicious use of his ecclesiastical patronage lay at the centre of his understanding of his role as Lord Protector.

After Cromwell's death in 1658, Richard Cromwell took over his father's ecclesiastical patronage. At the restoration of the monarchy, however, some of those put into livings by Cromwell were ejected from their benefices by returning royalist incumbents or dissatisfied parishioners. A further cohort of ministers, whose consciences would not allow them to work within a restored episcopalian Church, were forced out by the requirements of the Act of Uniformity in 1662. Yet the flexible boundaries of Cromwell's godly Church had unexpected consequences. Overall, less than a third of those ministers whom he presented left the ministry in 1660–2. The others found ways to accommodate their beliefs and personal circumstances within the Restoration Church and to continue their pastoral missions. This meant that over seven hundred ministers chosen by Cromwell were able to preach the word of God in parish churches across England and Wales after 1662. Whether Cromwell would have seen this as a positive or negative outcome is, of course, debatable. What is clear is that despite the almost total demolition of the ecclesiastical administration constructed by the Protector's regime, the godly ministry – the very heart of Cromwell's Church – continued to have an input into public worship long into the reign of Charles II.

⁸⁰ *The Cryes of England to the Parliament* (London, 1653), pp. 4, 6–8.

