

THE UNTIMELY DISAPPEARANCE  
OF THE BEVERLEY CYCLE:  
What the Records Can and Can't Tell Us

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The welcome invitation to contribute to a Festschrift for David Mills offered a good opportunity to reflect on the range of his own impressive work on many aspects of English civic drama. The most prominent has been that on the Chester Cycle and the records of Cheshire, and it was pondering on those, and going back to his edition of the Chester Plays as well as the *REED: Cheshire including Chester* volume that decided my choice of topic for this article.<sup>1</sup> Chester (and its Plays) offers a number of interesting points of comparison with Beverley, across the country in the East Riding of Yorkshire, and it is one particular point of striking dissimilarity that focussed my attention recently.

From about 1520, the Chester Cycle appears, on the evidence of the records extracted for Records of Early English Drama, to have been reshaped, apparently expanded, and rescheduled in the Church calendar, so that a one-day Corpus Christi production became a three day Whitsun event.<sup>2</sup> The Chester drama's apparently new lease of life in the 1520s is in stark contrast to the complete disappearance from the records of the Beverley Cycle after 1521. The purpose of this paper is not to attempt a point-by-point comparison between the two cycles (the different range of extant records in each case — most obviously the absence of any play text from Beverley — make that impossible); but I was inspired to return to the question, which has long puzzled me, of the apparent cessation of production of the Beverley Cycle about thirty to fifty years before Chester, Coventry, or York. The puzzle is not simply the early disappearance from the records in itself; it is that no extant local record gives any hint of a reason for the Cycle to have been abandoned after almost 150 years of customary performance and support both by guilds and by the town Governors (the elected ruling council of twelve). The major factor contributing to the later suppression of other mystery plays, the Reformation, can hardly be relevant in Beverley at such an early date; in any case the prominence of the town in the anti-dissolution movement of 1536, the Pilgrimage of Grace, suggests local religious conservatism rather than early stirrings of Protestant belief.<sup>3</sup>