

The Flight to Holland

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By the autumn of 1607 the Scrooby Church had been broken up, and the leaders were facing imprisonment for their views.

William Bradford, in his history, comments that " ... some were taken and clapt up in prison, others had their houses beset and watched day and night ... and most were fain to fly and leave their houses and habitations and their means of livelihood".

In this climate of persecution, it was decided to leave the country secretly for Holland, where there was greater religious tolerance, and where there already were a number of exiled English Separatists, including John Smyth and his Gainsborough Church.

The first attempt at departure took place during the winter of 1607-8. The Scrooby Church members made their way overland to Boston, where they had secretly made arrangements with the master of a small vessel to convey them across the North Sea. Reaching Boston, and having embarked, they found that the master had betrayed them to the authorities. They were taken into the town, where some were imprisoned for a month in the cells beneath the guildhall before being sent home. Several of the leaders were detained to be dealt with at the next assize court.

In the spring of 1608, another attempt at departure was made, this time from a deserted point on the Lincolnshire side of the Humber. The women and children made their way secretly by the river to the assigned place, whilst the menfolk walked overland. Arrangements had been made with the captain of a Dutch vessel to take them off in his ship.

The women and children arrived first and took refuge in Killingholme Creek, now on the site of Immingham Dock. The next morning the ship arrived and began to take the men on board. During this operation, a large number of armed men were seen approaching and the Dutch captain, frightened by this development, weighed anchor and set sail, leaving the women and children, in full view of the helpless men, to be taken into custody.

After fourteen days at sea, during which the ship was caught in a gale and blown almost to the coast of Norway, the men reached Holland.

The women and children were in pitiful circumstances. They were an embarrassment to the authorities, having no homes to go to, and were passed from one magistrate to another until they were allowed to leave for Holland to join their husbands.

By the late summer of 1608, the members of the Scrooby Church had all reached Amsterdam, where they joined the members of John Smyth's Gainsborough Church.

After a year in Amsterdam, the Scrooby Church members, dissatisfied with the teaching of John Smyth and with the morals of some of his church members, sought to move from Amsterdam and re-establish themselves as an independent church elsewhere in Holland.

The town they chose to move to was Leyden, the university centre, whose authorities agreed to accept them into their community. The move to Leyden was accomplished during 1609.

The Scrooby Church established itself in one of the poorer parts of the city and its members became involved in various artisanal trades. As time passed, some of the members were admitted as citizens of Leyden, and John Robinson and William Brewster taught at the university.

After 1617 the Scrooby Church members, although accepted as members of the Leyden community, began to realise that their children were growing up as strangers in a foreign land. The Church began to look for some other part of the world where they could re-establish the church and where they would not be regarded as foreigners. After some discussion, they agreed to take steps to move to the New World, along the eastern coast of North America, within the area of the recently established colony of Virginia.