



Saint Nicholas Owen

Born: Oxfordshire

The son of a carpenter, Nicholas was raised in a family dedicated to the Catholic Church and followed his father's trade. One of his brothers became a printer of Catholic literature and two were ordained priests.

Nicholas worked with Edmund Campion, Father John Gerard and Father Henry Garnet, Superior of the English

Jesuits from 1587 – 1594. Sometimes using the pseudonym *John Owen*; his short stature led to the nickname *Little John*. He spent over twenty-five years using his skills in the construction of 'priest-holes', escape-routes and some annexes for Mass.

In order to keep his building-work secret, most was carried out at night, his presence explained by the daylight role as carpenter and mason. Early examples of his work exist at Oxburgh in East Anglia, Braddocks and Sawston. There are over a hundred examples of his work throughout central England. He built around a dozen hiding-places for Thomas Habington's household at Hindlip Hall, Worcestershire; including that which Owen himself used prior to his capture. The authorities were aware the hiding-places existed, but neither their extent nor who constructed them. Nicholas did not have a formal novitiate, but having received instruction, he became a Jesuit Brother in 1577.

In 1581, when Father Edmund Campion was executed, Nicholas remonstrated with the authorities and was imprisoned but later released. He was re-arrested on 23 April 1594 with John Gerard and held in the Tower of London, from where managed to free himself. It is said that he later orchestrated the escape of Father Gerard.

He continued his work until the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot. Sir Henry Bromley, Worcester magistrate and staunch Puritan, arrived at Hindlip Hall with two-hundred men-at-arms and a warrant to search the house for priests and others involved in the Plot. Owen concealed himself in a secret nook behind the chimney with Ralph Ashley, whilst Henry Garnet and Edward Oldcorne hid elsewhere. Owen and Ashley spent four days in hiding, but with neither food nor water, finally surrendered. The Secretary of state, Robert Cecil said "It is incredible how great was the joy caused by his arrest . . . the

great skill of Owen in constructing hiding places, and the innumerable quantity of dark holes which he had schemed for hiding priests all through England."

Nicholas was imprisoned in the tower of London, where he underwent appalling tortures to make him reveal the whereabouts of priests and their hiding-places. His gaolers were warned not to kill Nicholas, but he was frail and suffered from a stomach hernia. An iron girdle was attached to his stomach to prevent rupture but he was abused so violently that on 1st March 1606, while chained to a wall and weighted at the ankles, his stomach split open, spilling his intestines to the floor. He survived for hours, but died on 2nd March 1606. The torturers spread the tale that Owen had committed suicide, but Father John Gerard later wrote, 'this slander was so improbable that even his enemies did not believe it, much less his friends that were so well acquainted with his innocent life and long-continued practice in virtue'.