

## Saint Robert Southwell

**Born 1562: Horsham Saint Faith, Norfolk.**

The youngest of eight children, Robert Southwell's father was a Protestant and courtier of Elizabeth I. His mother remained a Catholic and Robert was brought up in the Catholic faith. He was only fifteen years old when he entered the English College at Douai. He sought to enter the Society of Jesus two years later, but was refused because of his youth. He walked all the way to Rome to plead his case



and was admitted to the noviciate in 1578 where he was later made Prefect of Studies. Robert was ordained in 1584 and returned to England with Henry Garnet in 1586 to fulfil his mission amongst English Catholics.

Father Robert ministered to Catholic families in and around London and in 1589 became Chaplain to Ann Howard (née Dacre), wife of Philip Howard\*, Earl of Arundel in 1589. Southwell addressed his *Epistle of Comfort* to the Earl, who was a prisoner at this time, accused of treason. His religious writings included: *A Short Rule of Good Life*, *Triumphs over Death* and *Mary Magdalene's Tears*.

Southwell was also acclaimed for his poetry, much of which was collected in the *Maeioniae* – published after his death in 1595. These and *A Humble Supplication to Queen Elizabeth*, were widely circulated in manuscript.

Robert Southwell was arrested in 1592 when his association with Richard Bellamy was discovered. One report says Robert gave Richard's daughter, Anne, absolution during her confinement with a family in Holborn. Anne was offered Mass in a secret room in her father's home, at Uxendon Hall. Other stories suggest that Topcliffe raped Anne Bellamy, until she informed on Southwell's whereabouts. A subsequent pregnancy was then hushed via a hasty marriage to one of Topcliffe's servants. Whether under duress or not, she disclosed the time and place of the proposed Mass to Richard Topcliffe. Robert was arrested at Uxendon Hall on the 20<sup>th</sup> June 1592, still wearing his vestments. To the Queen, Topcliffe wrote, 'I never did take so weighty a man, if he be rightly used'.

Topcliffe was known as a fanatical anti-Catholic purported to have psychopathic and deviant sexual appetites. He was instrumental in the interrogation and torture of many of his victims. He had a special chamber set up in his own house, where he could personally involve himself in “interrogation” and boasted that his “methods” were better than those which were officially condoned.

Robert Southwell was taken to Topcliffe’s house before being transferred to the gatehouse at Westminster. His treatment and the foul condition in which he was kept lead his father to petition the Queen directly. He was removed to the Tower of London and allowed a Bible and clothing. There he remained for three years, being tortured on at least ten occasions.

Many of his poems were written during his incarceration. He was finally brought before John Popham of the King’s Bench, accused of treason. Southwell admitted his faith and priesthood, but denied any treachery against the Queen. Nevertheless he was found guilty and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered the following day, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1595.

On the gibbet, he prayed for the Queen and recited *Romans XIV*. His last words were ‘*in manus tuas*’. When he was hanging by the neck, witnesses including the Lord Mountjoy tugged at his legs to hasten his death before the executioners started on the disembowelment. Mercifully, he was already dead. He was thirty-three years old.