Commonwealth History and the Parish Register of Ashton Keynes

by John Parsloe

Parish registers consist almost entirely of lists of baptisms, marriages and burials. But occasionally, and particularly on the earlier pages, gems may be found inserted in blank areas containing items of more than genealogical interest.

One example is the first Parish Register of Ashton Keynes scattered with sums apparently calculating the age of dead parishioners and, in 1674, the idle doggerel on page 88:

> Gregory Perrott
> is my name and with
> my pen I wrote the same and if my pen were

Alas it ends there. But the Register also contains more serious insertions reflecting the Commonwealth in a number of ways: it seems that, while the Vicar during the days of the Commonwealth favoured the King, a later Vicar did not, as appears from his controversial insertion in the Register. This is quoted and its truth considered below.

The Vicar of Ashton Keynes from 1625 until 1658 was Allen Bishop. He matriculated at St Alban Hall, Oxford in 1601 at the age of 18 and so was born *c.*1583. He was instituted as Vicar of Ashton Keynes by Sir Thomas Sackville Kt., of Bibury, Gloucestershire. He married Susanna Savage and by her had a son Edward and a daughter, Mary (who

1 Woodcote Green House, Epsom, Surrey KT18 7DF

became Mary Chapplyn, and in 1665 had a deceased daughter Anne).[1]

Bishop was opposed to Parliament but was protected for a time by a relation, 'Burgesse' one of the sequestrators at Marlborough who tried to save Bishop from ejectment as Vicar by persuading him, for the sake of his wife and children, to pray publicly for Parliament. So, Bishop prayed:

> And now O L*or*[d], since thou hast commanded us to Pray for our Enemies, Remember the Parliament. And as thou hast put the sword of Justice into theyr hands Put it good Lord into theyr Hearts (and after a long chasme of an hawking thesis, he proceeded thus) to doe Justice, to shew Mercy, & to walk humbly

As a result, Bishop remained Vicar at the time, which must have been before his wife's death in 1656. The quotation is from Mathews, *Walker Revised*[2] and was contained in a letter dated 8 March 1703 to Walker from Nathaniel Gwynn, Rector of Daglingworth in Gloucestershire. Gwynn explains that Burges was a near relation of Bishop, one of the Sequestrators at Marlborough, and 'a mighty man with Oliver and his greate ffriend'.[3] The Burges were an ancient Marlborough family. Captain Isaac Burges of Marlborough was twice Sherriff of Wiltshire, in 1658 heading the address on the accession of Richard Cromwell as Protector and in 1660, proclaiming the accession of Charles II.[4] But Gwynn is probably referring to Isaac's brother, the parliamentarian minister, Cornelius Burges. Another of Walker's correspondents (John Tasker) wrote that Cornelius, who was ejected after the Restoration as a preacher at Wells Cathedral, 'lived frequently at Marlborough with his 30 troupers which Cromwell allowed him for his attendants'.[5]

Bishop also refused to preach twice on Sundays: 'wee cannot say that he is a Godly Able and Diligent preacher for he doth preach but once a Lords day and hath denied preaching twice'.[6]

Although Bishop opposed parliament, he observed the law. Following the passing of *An Act touching Marriages and the Registring thereof; and also touching Births and Burials* on 24 August 1653, the format for marriages in the Register from 24 April 1654 until 26 March 1658 changes. It shows compliance with the requirement that only Justices of the Peace could perform a marriage ceremony after publication of banns on three holy days (i.e. Sundays) in a church or chapel or, if the couples preferred, in the market place on three market days.

Susanna Bishop, wife of Alan Bishop, was buried at Ashton Keynes on 10 or 11 September 1656. In the following December and January, a number of depositions were taken before William Sadler, a Justice of the Peace. The civil case concerned a theft of two bags each with £20 pounds of gold. These Susanna had on her deathbed, unknown even to her husband, who might have claimed them. Seemingly the bags were stolen by a servant Katherine Strange. Bishop was apparently reluctant to prosecute for fear of increasing his unpopularity. Katharine would have been hung as a felon if convicted.[7] The outcome of the case is not known.

Bishop was eventually sequestered before 9 June 1658 being replaced by Jacob Brent who was admitted by the Triers.[8] But Bishop was restored at the Restoration in 1660 and remained Vicar until his death in 1664.

The Vicar who favoured Parliament was William Lea Briscoe who was born in 1760 and died in 1834. He was instituted as Vicar of Ashton Keynes in 1786 and moved there from Cricklade in the following year.

The last small inserted page 186 of the Register contains his statement that: 'This Register was reviewed surveyed examined and paged Sep*tembe*[r] 5[th] 1801 by me'. Page 67 of the Register contains a certificate, dated 8 April 1654, signed by three Justices of the Peace approving one Thomas Wall to be the 'Register' of Ashton Keynes.[9] There was

[1] *The Gentleman's Magazine* (July 1834) N.S. vol. 2, 552. For the family see: McCALL, F., 2015, *Discoveries in early modern history. A ghost story from the Wiltshire Quarter Sessions, 1656,* https://fionamccall.tumblr.com/post/119308087502/a-ghost-story-from-the-wiltshire-quarter-session [accessed July 2020].

[2] MATHEWS, A. G., 1960, *Walker Revised*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 370, citing *Triers Admission Book*, Lambeth Palace Library 999.44; and Bodleian Library: *MS J. Walker* c.1, fol.120.

[3] Bodleian Library: *MS J. Walker* c.1, fol.120.

[4] WAYLEN, J., 1854, *A History, Military and Municipal, of the Town (Otherwise Called the City) of Marlborough and More Generally of the Entire Hundred of Selkley*, vol.1. London: John Russell Smith, 281–2. BULL, H., 1859, *A History Military and Municipal of the Ancient Borough of Devizes and, subordinately, of the entire hundred of Potterne and Cannings in which it is included*. London: Henry Bull, 294.

[5] Bodleian Library: *MS J.Walker* c.4, fol.106.

[6] MATHEWS, *Walker*, 370. Allen Bishop entry quoting the 1655 Survey.

[7] McCALL, *Discoveries*.

[8] The Triers were the 38 persons appointed by the ordinance of 20 March 1653–4 to examine and approve any candidate for a benefice.

[9] The Justices were William Sadler (who heard the

space left below this certificate and on the preceding page. It is clear, as the handwriting is the same as on page 186, that Briscoe used the spaces to insert the following on page 67:

> Note # # Chronological Events
> King Charles 1st - was beheaded Jan*uary* 30th 1649
> Oliver Cromwell made Protector Dec*ember* 12th 1653
> Oliver Cromwell died Sep*tember* 3rd 1658
> King Charles 2nd restored May 29th 1660
> King Charles 2nd crowned April 23rd 1661 – at Westminster
> Oliver Cromwell was installed & proclaimed Protector
> of England Scotland & Ireland &c June 26th 1657 in
> Westminster Hall – Instantly on the Death of Oliver,
> (who was supposed to be poisoned & whose Remains were
> privately interred in a small paddock, near Holborn
> in that very spot over which the Obelisk is placed
> in Red Lion Square Holborn,) his Eldest son Lord

and to continue on the lower half of the preceding page 66:

> Richard Cromwell was proclaimed Protector
> of the Commonwealth - *The Obelisk is removed.*[10]
> John Hawkins Esq[r] of Ashton Keynes in the
> County of Wilts was a Member for Cricklade
> in the last Parliament for the Commonwealth
> of England Scotland & Ireland begun
> Jan*uary*1658 and dissolved April 22nd 1659.
> - The body of Oliver being privately buried, because it
> would not keep; his Effigy ca[r]ved in wood & enamelled
> with wax [words erased] was on Nov*ember* 23rd 1658
> [words erased] carried with solemnity
> to Westminster Abbey at the expense of 60000 Pounds
> - His dead Body was taken out of his grave & charged
> for a Traitor, by the council of those men to Charles 2nd, whom his power had raised to Greatness –

There are a number of references to John Hawkins, (born *c.*1611, who sat in the House of Commons in 1659) and other members of the Hawkins family in the Register.[11]

The truth of Cromwell's death and burial is still disputed. The evidence of the extraordinary grand guingol drama is exhaustively considered in McMains book on the death of Oliver Cromwell.[12]

There were contemporary or early rumours of poisoning.[13] The Oxford diarist, Anthony Wood, wrote of Cromwell's physician, Dr Bates:

> Jun. 1 or 2, [1663] Dr. Bates died at London of french pox and confessed on his death bed that he poysoned Oliver Cromwell with the provocation of two that are now bishops, viz. . . , and his majestie was privi to it.[14]

> Upon the Restoration . . . he got in with the Royal Party, (by his Friends report that he by a Dose given to Oliver hastened him to his end) was made chief Physician to K. Ch. II and a Member of the Royal Society.[15]

But the first reference in print to burial of Cromwell in Red Lion Square did not appear until 1787 when *Prestwich's Respublica* was published by John Prestwich, a descendant and namesake of the follower of Cromwell, the Reverend John Prestwich.[16]

After his unexpected death on 3 September 1658, the Council of State ordered Cromwell's doctors, including Dr Bates, to embalm the body which they did on the following day; but not all the bodily fluids were drained. Prestwich quotes his forebear's graphic description of the result when the corpse was lying in state in a magnificent closed coffin in Somerset House:

> although thus bound up and laid in the coffin,

Depositions regarding the theft from Susanna Bishop), Charles Martyn and William Blissett. Oddly, after Cromwell's death in 1658, Martyn and Sadler signed a further statement in the Register to the effect that Topp had been elected by the majority of the inhabitants.

[10] The words in italics are in the same handwriting but are an addition in different ink.

[11] First Register Book, 115 (marriage of John Hawkins, 1655); 171 (burials in the Chancel, 1658); Second Register Book, 5 (burial of John Hawkins in linen, 1686/7).

[12] McMAINS, H. F. 2000, *The Death of Oliver Cromwell*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.

[13] McMAINS, *Death of Cromwell*, 93 citing, beside Wood: SPALDING, R. (ed.), 1990, *The Diary of Bulstrode Whitlocke*. Oxford: British Academy, 496; BULSTRODE, W., 1853, *Memorials of the English Affairs*, vol. 4. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 335; RUTT, J. T., (ed.),1828, *Diary of Thomas Burton*, vol. 2, (containing *John Prestwich MS* of 1667). London: H. Colburn, 516.

[14] Bodleian Library. *Anthony WOOD, Diaries 7*, fols 19v-20r (1663 almanac, between May and June); and CLARK, A., (ed), 1891–1901. *The Life and Times of Anthony Wood*, vol. 1, Oxford: OHS, 475 (Wood's ellipsis).

[15] WOOD, A., 1721 (first published 1691), *Athenae Oxoniensis*. London: private.

[16] PRESTWICH, J., 1787, *Prestwich's Respublica* p.149. London: private.

> [the corpse] swelled and bursted, from which came such filth, that raised such a deadly and noisome stink, that it was found prudent to bury him immediately.[17]

The body had putrefied and the gas pressure ruptured the soldiered lead sheet in which it was confined. The funeral procession was postponed from the 9 to the 23 November and the coffin taken on 10 November at night to Westminster Abbey for private burial in Henry VII's vault.

Following the restoration of Charles II, regicides (that is those who signed the judgement for the execution of Charles I) were exempted from the Act of Indemnity. Some fled, some were pardoned and some were executed. But the Restoration Parliament then passed the Act of Attainder to exhume, and hang at Tyburn, the bodies of Cromwell, his son-in-law Ireton, Bradshaw the president of the court at the trial, and Pryde. In the event Pryde's burial was not disturbed probably because he was the only one known not to be buried in Westminster Abbey.

The Sergeant at Arms, James Norfolk, was responsible for the exhumation of Cromwell's body, and allegedly Ireton's, on Saturday 26 January 1659, and their coffins. There is, however, evidence that Ireton was in fact buried in Ireland where he died and that his coffin in the Abbey was empty.[18] On the Monday, the two coffins were put on carts and taken to the Red Lion, a coaching inn in Holborn. Bradshaw followed later.

For two days, the remains were at the Red Lion and on the Wednesday before dawn three bodies were hauled in coffins to Tyburn where they were taken out and hung on the triple gallows. After sunset, the bodies were taken down. They were thrown into a pit below the gallows after the heads had been hacked off. The heads were set on the roof of Westminster Hall. McMains in *Death of Cromwell* suggests the alleged bodies of Cromwell and Ireton may have been supplied by 'resurrection men' who illegally supplied corpses to anatomists.

This bizarre proceeding led to some wry humour. Zachery Grey in his *Review of Mr. Daniel Zeal's History of the Puritans*, 1744 says:

> About this time [1667] Mr. Xeal observes that Ralph Wallis, a Cobler of Gloucester, publish'd an Account of a great number of Scandalous Conformist Ministers, and named their Scandals: but forbears to inform us how Wallis came off upon his Tryal. The Author was to be tried for his Life, and when he came before the Judge, he ask'd him whether his Fault was greater than Oliver Cromwell's? No, said the Judge, not so great. Pray, my Lord, said he, Let not my Punishment be greater; if I must be hang'd, let me be dead and buried, and lie so long in the grave first, then take me up and hang me after: which made the Judge invite him to Dinner, and give him a Guinea instead of an Halter; a thing much the better of the two.[19]

Nathaniel Gwynn, the Walker correspondent, records a different version of this story in which Wallis asks to be hung after the 'New Fashion' i.e. seven years after death. In his account, the judge is King Charles II and there is no mention of a reprieve. It sounds like a common apocryphal tale.

There were probably oral rumours at the time that the body taken to Tyburn as Cromwell's was not in fact his and that he had been buried in Red Lion Fields. These fields became the property of an apothecary, Dr Nicholas Barbon or Barebone, who was the son of a famous anti-monarchical character, Praise-God Barebone. In the 1680s, the Doctor developed an estate on Red Lion Fields, adjoining the Red Lion Inn, with Red Lion Square at the centre. In the 1740s appeared 'a handsome Watch-House built at each corner … and a fine Obelisk of Stone in the Center'.[20] The obelisk had an inscription at the bottom:

> *Obtusum*
> *Obtusioris ingenii*
> *Monumentum.*
> *Quid me respicias, Viator?*
> *Vade*[21]

Presumably it translates: 'An obscure monument of an obscurer man of talent. Why do you look at me, traveller? Go away.'

It was suggested the monument was erected at the suggestion of Mr Dillingham, an eminent apothecary in the neighbourhood, and hence the pillar got the name of *Dillingham's Glyster-pipe*.[22] Dillingham was said to have sufficient evidence of the circumstances of Cromwell's secret burial and to have been a warm admirer of the 'good old cause'.

In 1787, *Respublica* was published with 'the

[17] PRESTWICH, *Respublica*, 175 n, 188–9.

[18] McMAINS, *Death of Cromwell*, ch. 2: Ireton Death and Destiny.

[19] *Notes and Queries* 5 July 1913: series 11, vol 8 (mislabelled as vol. 2), 2.

[20] STOW, J., 1754 edition. A *Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster.* London: private.

[21] PENNANT, T., 1790, *Of London*. London: Robert Paulder, 165.

[22] *The Gentleman's Magazine* 60 (Aug 1790), 702.

secret' of Cromwell's burial: 'His remains were privately interred in a small paddock near Holborn in that very spot over which the obelisk is placed in Red-Lion-Square, Holborn'.[23]

Sometime before the middle of 1790, the obelisk had disappeared. *The Gentleman's Magazine* reported that the obelisk is now taken down together with the stone watch towers at the four corners of the enclosure.[24]

This account relies heavily on *Death of Cromwell.* The author advances many other arguments in favour of his theories while admitting that the evidence is circumstantial. But the story seems to have convinced Briscoe who must have read *Respublica,* or at least *The Gentleman's Magazine*, leading him to insert his note on Cromwell in the Register. He will then have read of the removal of the obelisk in the *Magazine* and corrected his note.

There is a final episode in the tale of Cromwell's remains. In the 1680s a strong wind blew down one of the three skulls on Westminster Hall. Unidentified, it was picked up and eventually given to the Fellows of Cromwell's college, Sidney Sussex, Cambridge, who buried it in 1960.[25] One may speculate whether DNA could be extracted to establish whether or not it is Cromwell's skull.

[23] *Respublica,* vii, 149.

[24] *The Gentleman's Magazine* 57 (July 1787), 518; *The Gentleman's Magazine* 58 (April 1788), 295; *The Gentleman's Magazine* 60 (Aug. 1790), 702.

[25] FRASER, A., 1973, *Cromwell, the Lord Protector*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 698.