

## Prosecutions of Worcestershire Dissenters under the Stuarts.

ONLY in the present century have the records of Quarter Sessions between 1660 and 1687 been systematically explored to discover what dissenters were "presented" for absence from church, or convicted for presence at conventicles. Any one who lives within reach of his county town can do good service in this way, if he does not mind very dirty and tedious work, can decipher the remarkable hand that clerks of the peace affected, and has some bowing acquaintance with what was imagined to be Latin. It may well take a day to overcome initial difficulties, and to understand the method in which his county documents are arranged. But once these are mastered, a week will probably suffice to trace out the sufferings of dissenters for a generation. It should be remembered that certain cities within the geographic county had separate records of their own, so that Southampton must be examined as well as Winchester if Hampshire is to be understood.

When results are forthcoming, they will interest Quakers, Baptists, Independents, and Presbyterians. Papal recusants are generally mentioned separately, for they were liable to a regular monthly fine; but Protestant dissenters were seldom discriminated, and if the informers tried, they often made mistakes. Thus in Worcestershire it was customary at first to call everybody a Quaker, though a slight distinction was recognized, and some were "professed Quakers." Only after some years did it dawn on the authorities that some were "Anabaptists"; and they never recognized any other dissenters in the county.

From our side we know of Baptist churches at Bewdley-Bromsgrove, and at Worcester, before 1660, in the Midland Association.

In March 1659/60, Thomas Boylston, the Baptist leader, was still a J.P., and bailiff of Bewdley; but within the year things changed radically. In January 1660/1 John Heate was

charged with being at an unlawful assembly; at the end of March there were 14 Baptists and several Quakers in the Worcester jail. By the end of 1661 William Webley was indicted for refusing to take the oath of allegiance at Suckley. With July 1662 prosecutions began in earnest. For being at an unlawful meeting in Dudley, John Newton and John Payton and Thomas Dunton got into trouble, while Sir John Pakington committed several "Quakers So Called": Richard Payton, Edward Hall, George Fort, Henry Gibbs, Edward Gibbs, William Collins, John Johnson, William Workman, for being at an unlawful meeting; Richard R—— for refusing the oath of allegiance.

By August 1662, more than thirty-five local clergy retired from the parish pulpits. In other parts, many of them were supported by their friends and opened conventicles. But Worcestershire was rather an exception. Baxter aspired to play a part on a wider stage, and evangelical work was carried on at Kidderminster so quietly that Baldwin and his flock were never prosecuted. The Pedobaptists in the city were rather braver, and the cause they founded flourishes to-day at Angel Street. Spilsbury of Bromsgrove, and O'Brien of Swinford, at Stourbridge did honourable work. But the only other clergyman who did much work was Browne of White-lady Aston; and his efforts led to the Baptist church at Pershore. It is surprising how vanishing was the Pedobaptist work.

In December Richard Payton was committed on pre-munire, Edward Hall for words in open court; for assembling at worship, Joseph Cooper, Henry Gibbs, W. Collins, W. Webb, Robert Bayliss, Richard Walker, Abraham Weaver, Joseph Walker, Richard Bennett, W. Eades, and Stephen Pitway.

Records are missing for three years, and when they begin again, there was a new act, forbidding all Conventicles on pain of imprisonment or transportation. The rolls for 1665 abound in prosecutions.

Thomas Thornbury, of Eckington, had jostled his vicar and accused him of sacrilege in that he declared a bastard, after it was christened, was regenerate: being told that the Church bade him say so, he responded contemptuously, "Church! the Church lies then; is this your religion? are these your priests? the devil is in your priests, your religion."

At a general jail delivery in April, Thomas Feckenham was left in jail under a statute of James, evidently because he would not take the oath of allegiance. He is well known as a Baptist evangelist, but the fact that he would not take an

oath was sufficient ground for the county authorities to describe him presently as a Quaker.

Richard Hunt was charged with using opprobrious words against his majesty: "Down with this king of Babylon, this popery and these idolatrous ways as is now set up, and that they may not touch thy anointed."

In July Feckenham was again left in jail, and Samuel Corbyn "head and leader of conventicles" joined him because he would not take the oath of allegiance. Others not delivered were Edward Henry, John Rose, Josiah Hayward, Philip Alchurch, for holding unlawful meetings in their houses under pretence of religious worship.

September saw two or three new groups. A conventicle was held on the sixth at Bredon, when the officers caught James Sampson of Stoke Prior, shoemaker, Aaron Ward, George Ricketts, Thomas Ricketts, William George, Richard Hanley, Richard Walker, and Thomas Howslip, all averred to be dangerous, and one previously an officer in arms against the king. That did not deter others meeting twice in the next fortnight, wherefore John Bennett of Tredington, John Gunn, shoemaker, John Greene, tailor, Robert Lyne, carpenter, and George Greene, tailor, got into trouble. On 10 September John Halford of Armscott entertained a conventicle, for which he was summoned with William Banbury of Blackwell, Henry Stocke, Richard Payne, William Fleetwood, William Halford junior, John Sims, Robert Banbury, and John Buller. These were probably all Quakers.

We are well aware of the Baptist church of Bromsgrove at this time. Another trace of its persistence is that on 15 April, 1666, George Robinson of Bishop's Cleeve in Gloucestershire was fined 40s. for being at a conventicle in Chadwick, and refusing to pay, was sent to Worcester jail for two months.

In January some "Quakers" were taken at a conventicle, place unnamed, and were committed to jail by Thomas Wylde: William Pitt, Richard Fyds, Abraham Roberts, Richard Lewis, Edward Lewis, Edward Staunton, John Weight, Alexander Berdslye, Thomas Fitrale, and John Hoskins.

But an effort was made by Charles to secure more lenity, and a circular letter was sent out from Whitehall on 10 December, requiring a return of all prisoners in the jails on matters of religion, especially of Quakers. This elicited a return, of which fortunately the Clerk kept a copy, slightly illegible in places:—

"In obedience to your Honour's commands by your letter of the 10th of December last, we have at our general sessions

of that year, holden for the county of Worcester at the city of Worcester the xiiii day of this instant January, taken on account of all the criminal prisoners now remaining in the gaol of this county of Worcester of which we humbly render an account as followeth:—

“Thomas Payton late of Dudley in the county of Worcester, tailor, a professed Quaker, taken at a conventicle of Quakers in the said town of Dudley, a place much infested with Quakers and disorderly persons, and committed to the gaol the 7th of July, xiiii Caroli, and being a stubborn and incorrigible person was at the next sessions following tendered the oath of allegiance which he refused to take, was indicted and convicted of a premunire.

“Thomas Feckenham, another leader of the same sect, was likewise apprehended about 3 years since and tendered the oath of allegiance, and being still obstinate and [ ] has been continued a prisoner but with some liberty now and then extended towards with kindness which not as yet wrought and conformity or submission in him.

“John Jenkins, Wm. Pardoe, Quakers ex-communicated in the consistory of Hereford and taken by a writ De excommunicato capiendo about a year since.

“John Roberts of Droitwich in the county of Worcester, a professed Quaker, of a sufficient estate, for using his trade and calling on the Sunday or Lord's Day to the evil example of his neighbours, living in a market, was likewise presented and excommunicated and taken upon the same writ De excommunicato capiendo about a year since.

“John Tombs of the same place for the like offence and for refusing to permit the sacred ordinance of baptism to be administered to his children was likewise excommunicated and taken upon the like writ and delivered ut supra.

“Job Alibone, Tom Hodges. Both professed Quakers, for the like offence of denying baptism to their children and for obstinate refusing to come to church, was likewise excommunicated and taken upon the like presentment.

“All which persons so committed upon the writs De excommunicato capiendo are by the overmuch indulgence of the late sheriffs, undersheriffs and gaoler permitted to go at liberty about their occasions which over [kindness?] doth encourage them to persist in their presumptuous and incorrigible behaviour and are not to be found in prison [except?] for about an hour or a night once in six or eight weeks time.”

Apparently an order came to free them all, for the next return of those in jail includes none of this class. This encouraged all classes. The Baptist church at Worcester

re-organized on 10 February, 1666/7, with eleven men and ten women, but without any pastor. Its church book said that there was another Baptist church in the city, whose minister William Pardoe was still in prison; in his *Bethania*, published 1688, it is clear that he was a General Baptist. The P.B. church roll began with John Edwards, who afterwards removed to Leominster, and was prominent in the Baptist church there. These facts were recorded by the pastor in 1796.

Returning to the Sessions records, we hear that on 1 September, 1667, the chapel at Oldbury was filled with a crowd estimated by one informer at two thousand. A man called Steele or Fraiser was in the pulpit, did not pray for king, queen, and royal family, but on the lines suggested by his text, "Thy kingdom come"; the sermon was full of allusions to Daniel and the Revelation. When the informer, with three or four helpers, tried to fasten the door, he was maltreated; when troopers came, the preacher threw off his gown, and was lost in the crowd. This incident is the only one reported at Quarter Sessions which shows a clergyman, or the use of a public place of worship. Clearly, a congregation of hundreds simply could not be arrested, and informers never tried again. They confined themselves to obscure "Quakers and Anabaptists."

On 14 January, which probably means 1667/8, another return of men in jail shows Quakers, John Jenkins, Wm. Pardoe, John Roberts, John Toms, Job Alibone, Wm. Hodges; also Richard Payton committed 15 July in the xiii. year for not taking the oath of obedience, *premunire*; also Thomas Feckenham, committed by Thomas Wylde on 17 June, 1663, for not taking the oath of allegiance. Perhaps the magistrates regarded the freeing by royal command as illegal, like the liberty allowed by the sheriffs and jailor, and as soon as the Council might be presumed to have forgotten, took them again on the old pretext without any fresh trial.

In 1668 the Conventicle Act expired, and though men in jail got no benefit, no one could be jailed anew under its provisions, though there were many other ways of getting at conventiclers. Sheldon obtained from all parishes returns of meetings and people known unfavourably to the clergy. These were summarized as follows:—

St. Nicholas in Worcester, two. At the houses of Mr. Thomas Stirrup and Mr. Thomas Smyth every second Sunday, about 200 of all sorts, some people of good sufficiency. Heads and teachers, Mr. Richard Finchere, Mr. Thomas Badlam, Nonconformists. Another at the house of Mr. John Edwards, about 40 of all sorts, some of good account, teachers un-

known. [Here are the present Congregational and Baptist churches.]

Bromsgrove and King's Norton; several conventicles, but very few considerable persons in them, and their teachers are, sometimes Nonconformists and in their absence other laymen: their names unknown.

Defford, 20 mean people at the house of William Westmaccote, who keeps a school.

Redmarley D'Abitot, 60 or 80, heads, Mr. Smyth, Mr. Baston, Mr. John Giles.

Grafton Flyford, heads, Henry Hanson, George Maris. Birlingham, no conventicles, but some factious persons, inhabitants.

Inkberrow, at the house of the widow Stanley, Quakers, sometimes 300, often less.

Feckenham, Anabaptists at the house of John Feynes.

Dormston, 20 or 30 Anabaptists, mean persons, at the house of John Poole.

Kington, two, Anabaptists. At the house of Samuel Roper, 20 or 30 mean persons; head Thomas Feckenham. At the house of William Haynes, 20 or 30 poor persons; head, Thomas Feckenham, a cobbler, Eagleson, a clothier, Henry Hansome.

Bradley, at Thomas Handy's house. Eckles, Thomas Feckenham.

Pershore, three: 40 or 50 Presbyterians, 30 or 40 Independents, 12 families of Quakers.

On these facts Sheldon urged the clergy and wardens to take action, even if the constables would not. So that same year the churchwardens of Bromsgrove presented for absence from divine service:—John Williamson, John Taylor, John Sparry, Hatcliff, Thomas Wallis, John Wallis, Roger Whiston, John Field, George Bird, George Snow, Mr. Barnes, Henry Pinfield, William Waldron, Margery Asplin, Elinor Huggins, Ann Pitt, Jane Weekes, Ralph Jones, John Chandler, Richard Tilsbey, Thomas Norris. None of these names appear on the Baptist roll of 1672. From Eckington, Robert and Elizabeth Warner were presented as Quakers.

At the October Sessions, John Payne was brought up; also Robert Humphreys of Ombersley for convening several unlawful and riotous meetings and conventicles, to the terror of his majesty's loyal subjects, and the disturbing the peace of the realm. Colonel Samuel Sandys, who had committed him, is known to have issued a warrant under which his cows, his corn, and nearly all his furnishings were seized, and he never had any restored.

In January, 1669/70, the vicar of Bromsgrove wrote indignantly to say that at the funeral of Jane Eckels, wife of John, the public service was ignored; Henry Waldron entered the bellman's house and took his spade, John Price filled in the grave; it was a tumult of Anabaptists. About the same time complaint was made as to John Lineall of Kidderminster for scoffing at the Book of Common Prayer; "A magpie could say it as well as John Dance." Dance was the vicar whom nobody wanted in the town, who had drawn the tithes all the time Baxter had worked as Lecturer, but had done nothing.

At this point there is another gap in the rolls, but Quaker records tell us that on 4 July, 1670, Pardoe and three others, "meeting to hold a conventicle and refusing to give good sureties for their good abearing" were committed to the city jail. It is to be remembered that a permanent Conventicle Act came into force in 1670, providing fines only, without imprisonment. Then, that in March 1671/2 Charles offered to license men as preachers and places for worship; only about five per cent. of the applications were refused, and generally alternative applications were granted. Those on behalf of Worcestershire Baptists are as follows:—

The house of John Langford of Kierwood, in Worcestershire, Anabaptist. [To be taken with a group in Herefordshire, mostly issued on 30 September: the house of Mrs. Frances Prichard, of Leominster, Herefordshire, Anabaptist; the house of David Jones, of Moccas, Baptist; the house of Edward Price, of the city of Hereford, Baptist; Samuel Tracy, of the Priory of Clifford, Herefordshire, to be a Baptist teacher; the house of the abovesaid Tracy, at the said place.]

The house of Sir John Holman, of Kington, in "Herefordshire." William Randall, Congregational teacher, at his own house at Ombersley in Worcestershire, December 9th. The house of Elizeas Hatheway, of the city of "Glocester," Congregational. Elizeas Hatheway, Congregational teacher at his house abovesaid. [These entries show a most careless clerk, for Kington is in Worcestershire, Hatheway lived in Worcester, and was Baptist. Randall and Humphreys appear to be members of the Worcester church.]

It is further to be noted that Charles issued a pardon to 491 prisoners for conscience' sake, all over the realm; the only men thus freed at Worcester were Robert Smith, from the city jail, Richard Payton, from the county jail, both of them Quakers.

Public opinion arose now against the Roman Catholics, and the Test Act was passed requiring all office-holders to

lodge certificates that they had taken the communion according to the Prayer Book; these documents choke the files for some years to come.

In 1675 Thomas Darke, of Pershore, was presented for holding conventicle at the house of John Jones, with Robert Browne, of Whitelady Aston, Edgidius Lawrence, and Edward Perkins, an apothecary; all were fined on 9 September. Two years later the jurors presented four women of Fladbury for not coming to church on Sunday; but there is some reason to think they were selling ale, not holding a conventicle.

In 1679, informations were laid from Bewdley and Bromsgrove. At the former town, sixteen people met on 25 May in the house of Jacob Cotterell, at a conventicle, where George Robinson, of Halesowen, was preacher; those caught were David Harris of Bewdley, tobacconist, and his wife Joanne; Goodier Wildey, tanner, Ezekiel Partridge, of Stourbridge, tallow-chandler; John Partridge, of Lower Areley, tallow-chandler; Sarah Reynolds, of Stourbridge, widow; Adam Barefoot, of Wolverhampton. Now there was a heavy fine on the owner of the house, so the people at Bromsgrove were clever enough to hold worship in the graveyard, so that if any one was liable, it was the parson himself! He promptly informed on John Arowe, miller; W. Ashmore, husbandman; Thomas Hedon, furrier; John Chandler, nailer; with his wife Elizabeth; Thomas Bathe, shoemaker; and the preacher, Robert Hill, of Belbroughton.

For a year or two the "Popish Plot" occupied attention, and Papal recusants were more sought after, as the articles of inquiry show in 1681, with lists sent back by the constables. But with January 1681/2 the Quakers at Old Swinford were again presented; Ezekiel Partridge, Edmund Foord, Ambrose Crowley, Sarah Reynolds. In February is an entry of another kind, when Richard Woodcock, of Peopleton, charged Richard Claridge, clergyman, with threatening an injury: Claridge was destined to be baptized at Bromsgrove in 1691.

Once the Swinford Quakers were presented, the constables kept steadily at it, almost every quarter. And, fired by this example, the constables of Yardley began in January 1682/3 to present "fanatical recusants commonly called Quakers"; Samuel Bissell, John Crocksell, Mary Blackham, Grace Palmer, and others, now figure regularly.

In April, 1682, the Redmarley constable presented the Yatemens and John Williams for not coming to church; the same negligence was shown by Francis Yarnall of Martin Hussingtree.

On 27 May, Randolf Piggott, of Bromsgrove, entertained



a conventicle, including John England and George Gowing. These we know to be Baptists, from the church roll.

In October two Quakers were presented, Thomas Shawers and Stephen Lewis.

Next April the constable of Bromsgrove presented several Papal recusants, and was kind enough to say that he knew no others to present. The Baptist roll about this time shows 38 men and 49 women. In September the constable of Chaddesley Corbett presented two of them, William Cole, the nailer, and Mary Davies, as "reputed Anabaptists."

The Dudley constable was busy with Quakers in 1683; Philip Alchurch, Will Littley or Parsons, John Littley or Parsons; John Roades junior and his wife Isabel; Mary Billingsley and Anne Oakley only as absentees from church. The list was longer next year, with John Payton, yeoman, and his wife Katherine; John Newsome, miller; Joseph Shore, butcher; John Hipkins, nailer; Thomas Caddicke, carpenter, and wife Mary; Thomas Prickavant, nailer; John Roades; Samuel Southall; Roger Meredith, labourer; John Parkhouse, locksmith, and wife Judith. Shipston on Stour chimed in with more Quakers, Thomas Cooke, Joseph Gubbin, John Burlingham, and others, excommunicated.

Then Blockley started a series of informations, involving Edward Estbury, Edward Watcott, Edward Webb, Will Lane, Will Estbury, Will White, Joseph Hynge, Thomas Horne, and John Ansgar, of Icomb.

In December 1684, Richard Kerby and his wife, William Mills and Edward Baggot, were presented for absence from Bromsgrove church.

With July 1685, Worcester again is in evidence, for St. Michael's Bedwardine was not attended by William Lloyd and his wife, John Armes and his wife, Henry Smart and his wife, Mrs. George.

The last spasm of persecution was in 1686, when Yardley reported Thomas Fowler, W. Taylor, John Threckfall, John Heath, Thomas Holden, John Rawlins, Samuel Bissell, Richard Bissell, and Mary Blackham. Dudley church never saw W. Pearson, Henry Lilly, Richard Welletts, Thomas Russon. St. Michael Bedwardine presented as conventiclers John Page and wife, Jane Bacon, James Moreton, John Armes and wife, John Lloyd and wife, John Kent and wife, Henry Smart and wife. Powick presented as Anabaptists, Christopher Whiting and wife, the widow Oakley.

Thereafter legalized persecution ceased in the county. These records show us something of Baptist life at the three centres, show the members at outlying villages, and show a

movement round Whitelady Aston, Pershore, and Birlingham, which speedily took shape as an open-membership church, now represented at the Baptist church of Pershore. The Quaker details we leave to the Friends' Historical Society to interpret.

With the toleration act it became possible for a man to certify to Quarter Sessions a place where religious worship was to be conducted for Protestant Dissenters; and thereafter that notice exempted all present, and the owner, from the fines imposed by the Conventicle Act. The magistrates often did this with a very ill grace, as the following paper shows:—

“The wall-house now in the tenure and possession of the lady Rouse, her Ladyship desires may be entered, for the keeping of meetings there according to the Act of Parliament in that case lately made and provided.”

“And it is so allowed” was the reluctant and insolent note made on it; the magistrates had no power to “allow” or to disallow, only to receive and enter the certificate, and to give a copy of the record.

This was the first notice given at Worcester, in Epiphany Sessions, 1693/4. Four simultaneous notices were as follow:—New building on the close of John Dipple at Bromsgrove, 10 January, 1693/4 [Baptist]. House of John Hunnicke at Bromsgrove, Epiphany, 1693/4. House of William Tunks of Severn-Stoke, carpenter, 9 January, 1693/4. House of William Hartland of Naunton Green in the parish of Severn-Stoke.

Four years passed before another certificate survives. Then come: House of Francis Witton in the Ley, Old Swinford, 2 January, 1697/8. House of Edward Harris, mercer, Bromsgrove, 11 January, 1697/8. House of Simon Harrington of Bewdley, certified by Will Hankyns, Easter 1698.

With the new century the Baptists at Bromsgrove got a better meeting-house, and at Epiphany 1700/1 Richard Diggle, Humphrey Potter, James Lacy, and William Biggs notified a house of Humphrey Potter. A year later, Peter Payton of Tenbury had his house notified, but evidently some trouble arose, for on 13 July, 1703, a longer certificate was put in for the same.

Under Queen Anne the law was construed very strictly against dissenters, and there was rather a rush to secure protection, which resulted in the following registrations:—Samuel Windle at Inkberrow, Mary Hayward at Aston Magna, both 1702. Thomas Holmes of Hesley-yeild in King's Norton, 1702/3. Joseph Stokes of Dudley, July 1702. Mary Green, the New House at Little Witley, July 1704. John Sparry of Madeley in Bell-Broughton. Thomas Flower in the tithing of Whiston, parish of Claines, 15 January, 1705/6. Thomas Taylor in

Hartlebury and John Taylor in Chaddesley Corbet, 22 April, 1707. John Nickolls of King's Norton certified the newly erected house of Edward Dawks, 11 January, 1708/9.

These are all the certificates that survive from the Stuart period. The city records contain none, nor does the bishop's registry. The resulting picture of Protestant dissent in the county is not enlivening.

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## A Forgotten Hymnodist.

RICHARD KENT lived a hundred years ago, a deeply religious man, who wrote of his spiritual experiences almost daily. His speciality was to put them in verse; from May 6, 1824, to November 26, 1830, he wrote 558 hymns in one massive folio alone. A prefatory page acknowledges that his output to date was 8,973, in 21 volumes, with a general index to the whole in a separate book.

He lived in the Cambridge district, for there are allusions to a friend at Trumpington, and occurrences at Waterbeach and Great Swaffham. One of the volumes fell into the hands of a Bedford bookseller, from whom it was acquired in 1862 by W. H. Black, the Seventh-day Baptist. Fifty years later Messrs. Bull & Auvache sold it to Mr. Ernest G. Atkinson, of the Presbyterian Historical Society, who has now given it to the Baptist Historical Society.

The author claimed spiritual kinship with Bunyan, Hervey, Whitfield, Venn, Berridge, Guyse, Pool, and based his theology on the Articles and Homilies or the Westminster catechisms. Perhaps he might be called a Calvinistic Methodist, and though he disclaims Antinomian views, it is significant that only in an appendix to Gadsby have his verses been traced in print. One hymn was composed for the baptism of infants, but the immense majority are scriptural. An appendix brings out another side of life, with an elegy on a hare, a poem on the death of poor Grunter, "a rabet," and another on the death of Scowler, a horse.

Kent is unknown to Julian the hymnologist: can any reader furnish more information about him?