

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Review & Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_rande_01.php

HILL CLIFF IN ENGLAND.

W. T. WHITLEY, M.A., LL.D., PRESTON, ENGLAND.

I.—The Period of Myth.

Within an hour of landing at Liverpool lies an old burial-ground which has been used by our kinsfolk for nearly 250 years, and is probably the oldest Baptist cemetery in Britain. The real history is very interesting, and illustrative of the troubles around the rise of our denomination in the old country. Unfortunately it has often been studied by people whose outlook was too narrow, and who have missed other facts of great importance needful to a comprehension of what they saw. And more unfortunately still, the craving for antiquity has misled others with the desire to carry back our history, into too credulous repetition of vague statements. Most unfortunately deliberate forgery has been resorted to about thirty years ago, which has succeeded in deceiving innocent visitors who never suspect that they are the victims of fraud. These forgeries have brought some shame on us in the neighborhood, and deserve explicit exposure in Baptist circles for all of us who value antiquity, yet value honesty more. As many Americans have heard of this place, and some call every year to see it, they may welcome a critical statement, first of the false legends, then of real facts, some of which have been quite recently discovered and woven together by the present writer.

There was a stone in the burial ground dated 1357, now broken, and with the date damaged. Much local criticism of this has been printed, and it appears that charges of forgery were openly made and not denied, though countercharges of wilful destruction were made. One problem arises, whether Arabic figures were in use at that date in that neighborhood, or whether the Roman *mccclvii* would have been used. The Arabs learned these figures from India, and the Crusaders made

them known in Europe increasingly during the twelfth century. It is said that on the tower of the church at Daresbury, only four miles away, the date 1110 stands. But surely there is some mistake here as to fact or inference. The use of the 0 was much later than that of the other figures; a dated tower in the days of Henry I. is rather improbable. I have seen masons actually carving a date on a rising building which was forty years wrong, and was being put on the church to support a false theory, to the scandal of the town. Apart from the Daresbury case, nothing else is quoted: the really ancient churches of Warrington and Winwick close at hand have no dates so early as 1357, and the earliest seem to be in Roman characters.

Other dates are extant at Hill Cliff, ranging from 1414 to 1597. One of these was shown me last year by the present minister, who displayed it in all good faith, and has since given me a good photograph of it. Part of the inscription on it has been printed, but the most important element has been omitted. Here is a true copy:

Here Lys ye body
of Elizabeth pycroft
who dyd Decembr
1522 1714

One or two letters are worn, and there has been an attempt to obliterate the 7, which yet is quite legible: the date 1714 is in the natural place, and the figures seem to be of the same style as the lettering; while the date 1522 is not in the natural place, the figures 15 are of a modern type, standing not straight, without the 5 projecting below the line, and the surface of the stone there shows signs of manipulation, as if the original inscription had been December 22, 1714. A single glance led me to suspect falsification. A little enquiry showed that this was notorious, and had been exposed in print, first in a lively correspondence in the *Manchester Courier* of 1877, in a department used by antiquaries, then in a reprint under the editorial care of Mr. Earwaker, whose eminence in local antiquities was supreme. In his "Local Gleanings" we find that two stones then reading 1622 had lately been altered from 1692 and 1699. The

names of the forgers were known, and were offered for publication if desired; no one asked for them or disputed these allegations. Nor was this because no Baptist noticed the discussion; one offered vague traditions, and received a lesson on what constitutes evidence; another was challenged by name to answer. At the moment a quarrel among the Baptists on the spot gave fair reason for attending to more pressing business, but five years later the challenge was taken up in the issue of a little pamphlet, which has since been acknowledged and admitted to be sent to press too hastily. Meanwhile the antiquarians had dropped the subject with general scepticism, one going so far as to assert that 1676 was the earliest date known before the recent tampering with the stones, a statement which appears to me slightly too incredulous. After local inquiry, I find no record of any contradiction, unless we may accept as such the little book by Mr. James Kenworthy which ignores this discussion and reprints the challenged dates without notice to innocent readers.

Under these circumstances no cautious historian will use any information given on the stones until it is corroborated from other sources, or unless it was taken from the stones before 1860. While generally the rule is sound, not to follow printed transcripts but refer to the originals, yet unhappily there is now no guaranty that what stands on the stones here is genuine.

Look now at five other items of evidence, not indeed tainted, but scarcely more valuable. It has been claimed that Roger Holland, who is known to be of a good local county family, and to have been martyred on June 27, 1558, was a Baptist. Not stopping to ask what "Baptist" is supposed to mean at that date, turn to the obvious authority, Foxe's Acts and Monuments. Several pages are devoted to the trial. He was asked by Chedley whether he were loyal, and when he quoted in reply from Paul's advice to obey the higher powers, Chedley queried, Then you are no Anabaptist! For in those days "Anabaptist" meant almost "Anarchist" to the minds of rulers still thinking of the Munster episode, Holland replied with spirit, "No, nor Papist either!" At a later examination by Bonner, much the same dialogue ensued, and again both judge and prisoner

agreed that he was no Anabaptist. Was he then a Baptist? He was converted by a girl, whom he married in gratitude; when their child was born they did not call in a Catholic priest, but had the infant christened by one of the new faith. Now in view of these facts, so readily accessible in such a well-known book, what is to be thought of the constant repetition of phrases like "a Baptist of the name of Roger Holland"?

Next it is claimed that a Mr. Weyerburton, who lived at Broomfields near Stockton Quay, a scion of the Warburtons of Arley, a famous Cheshire family, was "the recognized minister at Hill Cliffe" till his death in 1594, when Mr. Daintith succeeded. Granted that such families and places did exist, we are a long way off proof that these men existed or that they were Baptists. Until the exact wording of the old land deeds is made known, there is nothing tangible to examine.

"The next minister, Thomas Slater Layland, was buried in the graveyard in 1602, and is styled on the stone a minister of the gospel." He may have been, but probably not a Baptist minister, and especially not at that date. I have not yet been able to verify his existence at any date, nor even to find the name in the vicinity; though of course evidence may come to light at any time.

"In 1642 Mr. Tillam was the minister." This is not more than ten years too early, and it may yet be proved that he was here then. But to say "the" minister is an anachronism. The term Minister in those days meant in Baptist circles not Pastor, but an unpaid unprofessional preacher, whether stationary or itinerating.

A Bible printed in 1638 was used a few years later as the pulpit Bible. Supposing this to be true, what is the inference? The Bible is one of the Royal Version of 1611, which was at the start so unpopular that the Puritans continued for a while to use the Genevan version. If the Hill Cliffe congregation dated from before 1600, it would be a strange thing for them to disuse the Genevan and adopt the Royal version, put out by James and revised in 1638 by Charles, against whom their friends were actually in arms. But if the church really arose about 1650, when the Genevan was losing ground fast, and when

the Royal version had been reported on by a Puritan committee as the best in the world, then it is comprehensible that a new church should adopt the current version. As for the minister's walkingstick of this period! have we not read in Mark Twain of some pilgrim busting a chunk of granite and labeling the pieces as a bit of Memnon and a fragment of the Acropolis?

It is regrettable to surrender any story of our antiquity; but loyalty to truth compels an acknowledgment that not a single fact has yet been established relating to Baptists here before 1651. That was the date when Baptists swept up into the heavens like a fiery meteor, alarming the country; and the probability is that Baptists really began their course here not more than a year or two earlier.

If students had thought of exploring other records of that period they would have found facts which have a bearing on the real history of the Baptists of Warrington—for this large town, and not the Cleft Hill across the river, was the true centre.

II. Probable origin at Warrington.

Warrington is an ancient town on the Mersey, eighteen miles above Liverpool, and sixteen below Manchester, on the edge of Lancashire, with Cheshire just across the river. These counties belonged to the diocese of Chester, whose records for our period are in fair condition, and have been studied and indexed not only by local antiquaries, but also by a Historic Society for the two counties. The Chetham Society has also done admirable work for the district, and the Camden Society has published several volumes, including the Clarke Papers, bearing on military affairs in the Commonwealth time. The Royal Historical Society puts forth frequent volumes all yielding gleanings to the student who knows what to look for, and the State Papers, Domestic, are well calendared and indexed. None of these advantages were available to Crosby and Ivimey, who were further handicapped by being Londoners. And writers on "Hill Cliffe" seem rarely if ever to have turned their attention to the records named. In the story ensuing, many facts are

for the first time laid before Baptists, and the argument appears absolutely new. The two points to be rendered probable are;—That the church was a Warrington church; That it originated in 1648 or 1651.

The district between Warrington and Preston, twenty-seven miles north, has never accepted the Reformation heartily, and was a Royalist stronghold in 1640. Charles once thought of raising his standard here, and though he chose Nottingham instead, yet Warrington was occupied by the Earl of Derby and fortified, while the country to the east and south was in Parliamentary hands. The district across the river, where the Cleft Hill stands, was the scene of constant skirmishes about 1643, during the siege. One of these was fought exactly on Stockton Heath, and in the death-roll is the name of John Amerie, constable of Barnton, buried at Great Budworth. This family in after years yielded Baptist members: the legend that Baptists fell then and were buried at Hill Cliff is unsupported by any evidence and is out of harmony with known facts. Another tale is that members of the congregation at this time suffered martyrdom by order of the Earl of Derby! This legend can be traced in its growth, and shrinks up into a baseless story about two Presbyterians, killed by Edward Norris.

Returning to solid fact, we find that when the royalists held the town, there was a Puritan woolen-draper named John Dunbabin, who was ready to act as spy and send out information to the besiegers. And so when the town was taken, and Colonel John Booth was put in command for the Parliament, converting it into a huge arsenal, he expelled every civilian except those who would undertake to bear arms in case of need. Now Crosby long ago printed a letter by Captain Deane, telling the Bishop of Lincoln that at the beginning of the Civil War, Baptists were practically unknown in the army, a fact that is also apparent from the silence about them then. We know also that when they did become prominent, Booth swung over to the other side and fought for the Royalists. It is highly improbable that right under his eye, in a garrison town kept by him in such strict order, or even within two miles, any Baptist church could be found. And as no particle of evidence to that

effect will bear any scrutiny, we may safely say that Baptists did not exist here in 1645.

With that date the army was new modelled, with a view to efficiency, and a new religious element began to attract attention there. By 1647 Colonel Harrison is at the front, heading a very republican regiment of cavalry. Next year he was sent to Manchester to oppose the Scotch invasion on behalf of the king, which was joined by many Presbyterians like Colonel Booth, of Warrington. Naturally their new ecclesiastical system became rather shaky, and a certain John Wigan quite declined any jurisdiction by a Presbytery. This clergyman had gone from place to place, accumulating great money claims on the State for his preaching; but now he had founded a Congregational church on the outskirts of Manchester, while yet drawing a nice stipend from the State whose system he rejected. He and Harrison were on the high road to a fresh position.

In the Scotch invasion Harrison was wounded at an early stage, and the command fell to Cromwell, who won the battle of Preston and pursued as far as Warrington, where all the infantry surrendered. Cromwell stayed one or two days to settle affairs, then went to Scotland. One of the colonels at Warrington was Deane, a friend of Robert Lilburne, and perhaps already a Baptist.

Certainly it was at this time that John Wigan became a Baptist, bought the old college in Manchester, where he converted a barn into a meeting-house, and in 1649 established the first regular Baptist meeting in the north of England. There is indeed a vague statement that at the same time and under the same circumstances a Baptist church arose at Broughton in Cumberland, but contemporary evidence is lacking, and the probability points rather to 1651. It is noteworthy that Baptist churches seem often to have been planted by soldiers; sometimes whole companies formed churches, and once it was mooted whether a regiment should be composed of members. Often these were purely military and left no trace when the regiment moved; sometimes they struck root among the local civilians; sometimes disbanded soldiers planted churches where they settled: but from 1649 the army rapidly became a Baptist

stronghold. So evident was this to John Wigan that he handed over the Manchester church to another minister, J. Jones, and enlisted.

Soon the English Presbyterians were alienated by this turn of events, and so a second Scotch invasion was undertaken over the same route, with a curious repetition of events. Charles II. had been crowned at Scone, a covenanted Presbyterian king, and determined to try for the greater kingdom also, starting south in 1651. As before, he found the path blocked by Major-general Harrison with his cavalry, and with the county militia flocking to support him; both regulars and militia now strongly Baptist. Captain John Wigan had scoured the county and locked up all the Royalists in Lancaster and Liverpool jails, so that when the Scotch reached Warrington they found no sympathizers, but Harrison holding the bridge and Lilburne approaching from Manchester. These drew aside, let the Scotch cross, and edged them down to Worcester, where they were annihilated.

Thus first in 1648 and again in 1651 we find several officers at Warrington, who at the latter date we are certain were Baptists. Is not the probability great that the Baptist church known to be at Warrington in 1652, originated at one of these times? Indeed we can heighten the probability and indicate one definite man who seems to be the founder, Thomas Tillam.

Hanserd Knowles had returned from Dora, N. H., and founded a Baptist church which in 1645 met at Coleman street in London. Next year it was one of eight which endorsed the first Particular Baptist Confession of 1644. To this church joined one Thomas Tillam, who undoubtedly had much connection with the continent, and is said to have been a Catholic. Certainly he had sufficient talent to be appointed one of the church's ministers—unpaid preachers. But before he had been long enough with them to be thoroughly well known, he quit London, apparently as Captain, though the reference for this fact is temporarily mislaid. The church seized the opportunity to commission him as "Messenger," or Home Missionary, to plant new churches. At the end of 1651 he was at Hexham, in Northumberland, in touch with other military missionaries

at Newcastle, Simpson, Mason, Gower, Hobson, etc. And when in a few months he built up a new Baptist church, he introduced to its membership his wife Jane, a member of "the church of Christ in Cheshire." This phrase suggests that the members were dotted about over a wide area, and reminds us that we know of some at a Cheshire hamlet called Warford, twelve miles from Warrington, a military plantation close by some more of the Booths.

Next year Tillam went again on a short evangelistic tour, by which means many were added to the church in Cheshire; and next year again he bore a letter from Knowles' church to the saints in Cheshire. This has always been read in connection with a letter dated 1654, June 26, from Warrington, where we meet such phrases as, an "eminent (by us entirely affected) servant of Jesus Christ, who we trust will be instrumental (in the hand of our God, whom we serve) to carry on both you and us in this our pilgrimage." All these facts are readily accessible either in Douglas' History of the Northern Baptist Churches, or in Underhill's Fenstanton Records, etc.

My argument is that admittedly Tillam was the founder of the Hexham church, to which this last letter was sent, and the phraseology quite bears out the theory that he was also founder of the Warrington church, about the same time. This letter is signed by nine men. Two of these I have identified by their wills: Richard Amery was a shoemaker of Weaverham in Cheshire, eight miles south of Warrington; Peter Eaton was a sharman (? shearman) of Warrington. Four others are identified with probability, living at Chester, Whitley green, and Penketh, all within fifteen miles, in both counties; a seventh appears to belong to the family of Thomlinsons in Warrington; an eighth to the Millingtons of Warrington and Appleton, to be heard of again at this church.

We must not forget that there was an official Presbyterian Church of England at this time, nowhere so well organized as in Lancashire. If the District Synod met regularly at Preston, Warrington was the centre of a small Presbytery, and the parish church was held by a Presbyterian. Yet while Baptists controlled the army, Baptist churches were able to meet unmolested.

We may conjecture that the little company gathered in the warehouse of Dunbabin the draper, or in the woolshed of Eaton the shearman. We know that early in 1657 Major John Wigan having been cashiered from Cromwell's guards because he disapproved of the Protectorate, came back with a handsome solatium in arrears and salary, and married off his daughter Elizabeth to Daniel Dunbavin of Warrington, son of our friend John, now deceased. Next year he married off his daughter Lydia to the Rev. William Morris of Manchester, a Baptist minister, who soon removed to a village two miles out of Warrington.

After Cromwell's death the Independents fell from power, Baptists and Presbyterians struggling for control of the army. Baptists won in England and Ireland, and Wigan was promoted and put as second in command of a regiment under Overton, another Baptist, stipulating for other officers of the same stripe. Once more he came into this district, and the Baptist church at Manchester supplied useful information to the Baptist officers, which led to the defeat of the Presbyterians at the last battle in the Civil Wars, here at Warrington. But Monk in Scotland saw that there was no Baptist leader strong enough to secure peace, and skilfully manœvered till some regiments rose against their Baptist officers, others were bewildered and did nothing, Wigan and the great Harrison himself were arrested, and everything pointed to the Presbyterians calling in Charles as a refuge of despair. Brother Tillam, who had developed into a Seventh-day Six-principle Baptist, eager for State pay, founding a church at Colchester, debating in St. Paul's Cathedral with a Free-will Baptist, shared in the downfall and got into prison.

In the general whirl of events, it was clear that Baptists were about to fall on evil times, and the Wigan family began to prepare a refuge for the church at Warrington, of which we must speak another time. But before they quite gave up hope, Baptists made two or three efforts to prevent Charles establishing himself as autocrat. Tillam took over a hundred families to Germany, and came back to a meeting of Baptists and Fifth-Monarchy men in August, 1661. Wigan actually did take part in a rising earlier that year which failed, and he was in trouble for this till he and his wife died in the Great Plague of 1665.

If we bewail the sufferings of the Baptists between 1664 and 1688, let us not forget that Baptists had helped hold down the Royalists at the point of the sword, had forbidden their Episcopal worship, had taken State pay and public money in many places, had fined and imprisoned the Episcopalians year after year. Retaliation was natural.