

6. In honour of Abingdon

It has long been customary to ascribe the outbreak of the Civil War to some arbitrary point in 1642, perhaps the sparsely attended ceremony at Nottingham in August when the king formally raised his standard, or the first pitched battle, that of Edgehill in October, after which there could be no going back. More recently, scholars have become aware that the descent into the abyss was a long process: a gradual fragmentation of the body politic that seemed at first manageable, but which eventually accelerated out of control. Throughout the 1630s, the policies – the religious policies, mainly – of the king and his archbishop, William Laud, had pulled the body politic in a direction it did not want to go. In 1640, those policies involved that body in an unpopular, ineptly conducted, and in the end disastrous war against its Scottish neighbour, and many Englishmen found to their surprise that they did not wish for a royal victory. From its opening in November of that year, the Long Parliament provided an alternative pole of attraction, deliberately setting its own influence and authority in opposition to that of the king. Like some physical object caught between two powerful fields, the body of the nation tore apart.

The breakdown of harmony between the nation and its rulers, and within the nation itself, can be followed by various strands of evidence, but perhaps especially in the almost vertical rise in the rate of publication of printed pamphlets that began during 1640, even before the royal government had lost its nominal control of the printing industry.¹ ‘Paper bullets’ were flying well before the more directly lethal sort. One effect of religious enthusiasm had been an intensification of literacy even at relatively low levels of society, and authors now might be, like their readers, of a class that would not previously have been considered part of the political nation. The bulk of such plebeian scribbles originated in London, since it was there that religious and political debate was perhaps most heated, and presses certainly most numerous. But Abingdon, as we have seen, had its differences and debates; and there was a university press at Oxford. Abingdon’s main contribution to the literary strife came from the unlikely pen of its serjeant-at-mace, John Richardson, who produced an account, in endearingly naïve rhyming couplets, of a civic celebration held at the instigation of Parliament on Tuesday, 7 September 1641.² Richardson’s poetical talents were slim, but his work can nonetheless be read at different levels, and gives an excellent indication of local preoccupations in Abingdon as the national crisis deepened.

ABINGDON IN CONTEXT

Richardson's status in the town was never quite as humble as his position might suggest. He first comes to notice in 1625 as a witness to John Blacknall's will.³ His employment as serjeant-at-mace dates from 1628, in the mayoralty of John Mayott.⁴ He seems to have spoken somewhat out of turn to Mayor Benjamin Tesdale, who had him dismissed in December 1637 as 'having opposed the maior, bailiffs and principall burgesses in matters concerning this corporation'. The minute in the corporation records was signed by nine members. But he was reinstated without any particular comment in the following March.⁵ Plainly, he was of the Mayott faction.⁶ It can only have been as a contribution to the local factional conflict that his 'weake and illiterate' verses could have justified the expense of being set in print. What might at first sight appear to be a straight description of an enjoyable civic occasion was actually tendentious and provocative, and must have been so understood.

The significance of the publication was more than purely local. The king was in Scotland, where he had gone ostensibly to make peace with his rebellious northern subjects after twice being ignominiously defeated by them in the so-called Bishops' Wars. It was fully understood that his real intention was to rally what political support he could in Scotland against the Puritan-led English parliament that had been steadily stripping him of his traditional kingly powers. He was comprehensively out-manoeuvred. A peace treaty between Edinburgh and Westminster had been long in the making, but this was now quickly ratified in both places. The two armies that faced each other across the Tyne, both of them paid by the English parliament at the cost of the English taxpayer, could be disbanded. A small, tightly-knit Puritan faction effectively managed the Westminster parliament, and it was well understood that the Scottish army had been kept in being only because they might have a use for it. The English army, or at least its officer corps, was loyal to the king, and there was wild talk of marching it down to London and dealing with the parliamentary leaders in a radical manner. A civil war might well have started in the hot summer of 1641, but the treaty removed the immediate fear and brought about a palpable release of tension. It was this that, at Parliament's behest, was being celebrated.⁷ Richardson dedicates his work 'to the worshipfull the Major, Bayliffs and Burgesses of the Burough of Abingdon, in the County of Berks' but celebrates in the introduction 'the unexpected making up of great Brittaines dangerous Breaches'. 'The mercy,' he declares, 'was great, and the miracle wonderfull.'

IN HONOUR OF ABINGDON

The day was to consist of 'prayers, reading, and preaching the word, in all churches and chapels of this realm'. The parliamentary order was made on 27 August, but was not published until the 30th, giving very little time for preparation. It is unclear why Abingdon decided to make a civic rather than a purely religious occasion of it, but a sermon and feast was due about that time anyway to celebrate the new-made mayor, and it may have been felt convenient for the two occasions to be merged.⁸

In Richardson's description, the festival started much as Parliament had intended. The bells of both churches began ringing at dawn, and by 7 a.m. the population had flocked in great numbers to St Helen's.⁹ Two sermons, preached by different but unnamed divines, held (one hopes) the attention of the congregation until midday. After a two-hour lunch break, a third sermon must have completed the satisfaction of even the most zealous. Richardson says nothing of the content of the sermons, but if they followed the model being set the same day in London they will have used a discourse of Puritan triumphalism and called confidently for renewed purification and a return to the principles of the Protestant Reformation after the disgraceful backsliding of the Laudian years.¹⁰ It was at four o'clock that the celebrations took a more popular turn. The author, with a newly gilded mace, preceded the mayor and burgesses in solemn procession to the steps of the market cross, where the clerk led a crowd of two thousand people in a spirited rendering of the 106th Psalm. The local trained bands marched with 'drums and fifes and colours flying' and gave a display of musketry. There were bonfires, and drinks paid for by the council; there were shouts of 'God save the king'; and after the formal celebrations had come to an end with the dignitaries escorted by the musketeers to their homes, street parties continued until late. Richardson emphasizes that there was no drunkenness, and that the charity collection realised the satisfactory sum of £13 or £14.

It is hard to avoid the suspicion of a point of irony in Richardson's deadpan description of seven hours of sermonising as the Puritan idea of a delightful party. But the account as a whole carries an ideological freight that will not have been lost either on the local Puritans, if they could ever have brought themselves to read it, or on their conservative opponents. Richardson's description of the day holds up a conservative ideal of urban life, an ideal that would have had the approbation of Francis Little and his colleagues of a generation earlier. The citizens come together harmoniously in a celebration commanded from above. They do so under the benevolent oversight of the mayor and his brethren; they pay their due respects both to God (at extreme

ABINGDON IN CONTEXT

length) and the king, and at the end of the day return home to an evening of traditional sociability. It was exactly those traditions of reciprocal respect within the social hierarchy and of conviviality among neighbours that the Puritans were accused, with some justice, of subverting.

In comparing Richardson's idealised account with the reality they had experienced, his readers will have had to confront the extent to which their world had already changed. The old ideals still resonated, but by this time harmony had given way to dissonance. Magisterial authority throughout the country was being questioned, contested, even ignored. Neighbourly friendship was to be replaced by a joyless fellowship in Christ.¹¹

The poem is not overtly polemical, but Richardson makes his position on current controversies clear. The main concern is a carefully calibrated attack on Puritan opposition to sacred music, church bells, and market crosses. All of these were in jeopardy. The recent treaty agreed to bring England into 'nearer conformity' to the Presbyterian Scottish church. On the eighth and ninth of September, as Richardson was pondering his poem, the House of Commons discussed and agreed a declaration against 'images'. Its legal status was unclear, and its promulgation haphazard. Yet it provoked in London and elsewhere a wave of iconoclasm and destruction that in turn produced an anti-Puritan backlash.¹² It is this that will have provided the context for his literary effort.

Thus,

'...th'unparall'd, harmlesse, threaten'd Crosse
(Yet lately blest from Babylonish drosse)
Where *Aarons* bells in *Helens* Church doe ring
Peales, that doe blesse us from the poyson'd sting
of death eternall...'

The allusion is to Exodus Chapter 28, on the accoutrements of the high priest when he enters the sanctuary and ministers at the altar, 'that he die not'. Richardson is quoting scripture against people who were claiming a monopoly of biblical interpretation, and using verses that they would have difficulty in explaining away. Puritans rejected priesthood as an unholy attempt at magic; their ideal clergyman was a minister who would teach and exhort, but had no esoteric powers. The idea of ringing bells to ward off supernatural dangers would have seemed to the Tesdales and their party as obscene superstition. But yet, could they really maintain that that was the function of Abingdon's church

IN HONOUR OF ABINGDON

bells? In fact, the Abingdon bells would survive the Civil War and its aftermath.¹³

But the poet also shows his concern for the 'threaten'd cross'. There was an intense campaign against market crosses, seen, however unreasonably, as relics of popery and as standing invitations to popish idol-worship. Abingdon conservatives were proud of their cross, a noble construction that brought in visitors and had been rebuilt by the care of Francis Little as recently as 1605.¹⁴ It was admired or, in some quarters, abominated, as second only to the Cheapside Cross in London, which had to be guarded round the clock against attempts by zealous iconoclasts to deface, dilapidate, or destroy it.¹⁵

Again,

'Over my head, I saw King *David* stand,
Listning toth' Musick, with his Harp in hand,
Sure when the Psalmist liv'd, with's sacred Lire,
He seldom play'd, or sung to such a Quire.
If either King could speake, hee'd sweare by's Crown
No Haire-braind Separatist would pull him downe:
For why, this heavenly joy, we had so late,
Did seeme, in part, the Crosse to consecrate.'

The section is rich in biblical references that would have been familiar to contemporaries, whether Puritans or not. The Puritans, it suggests, consider themselves more holy than King David, who exercised his musical skills with divine approbation. The nearest approach to sacred music allowed by the Puritans was the lining-out technique which Richardson describes, where the clerk sings a line of a psalm and the congregation repeats it.¹⁶ But the main key to the passage is the apparently rather strained trope that the cross was somehow being consecrated. This points to 1 Chronicles, chapter 16. The cross becomes a figure for the ark of the covenant, which David himself brought into Jerusalem and consecrated with instrumental music, singing, and dancing. His wife Michal was cursed with sterility for her disapproval. The Puritans, who wanted the cross demolished, were implicitly warned of the fate of Uzza, who touched the ark with impious hands and was instantly struck dead.¹⁷ The threat in fact did not save the cross, which would, less than three years later, become a casualty of the war.

A further allusion allows Richardson himself a brief moment at centre stage. This is to Ezra 3:5,10-13 and Nehemiah 12:27-47, describing the elaborate musical celebrations at the re-consecration of the Jerusalem temple

ABINGDON IN CONTEXT

by the exiles returning from Babylon. Their intent was 'to praise the Lord, after the ordinance of David king of Israel'.¹⁸ The ordinance in question was the one delivered at the consecration of the ark; it was to worship 'in the beauty of holiness', a concept now considered Laudian and utterly rejected by the Puritans.¹⁹ The poet is able to present himself in the guise of the biblical writer. Nehemiah was cup-bearer to the king, as Richardson is serjeant to the mayor. Both of them, by virtue of their functions, stand somewhat apart from the celebrants as well as being recorders of the events. 'So stood the two companies of them that gave thanks in the house of God, and I, and half of the rulers with me', says Nehemiah, while the serjeant takes his position on the steps of the market cross with the rulers of the town, although he is not one of them.²⁰ Richardson has a privileged insight into local political affairs, while his fellow-townsmen can only respond to them.

Abingdon in the early 1640s was thus a divided town. Among the élite, it was conservatives who held the smaller of the town churches, St Nicholas, and the grammar school; they formed an admittedly unstable majority in the borough council and among the governors of Christ's Hospital, and had seen their candidate returned to Parliament. Yet the larger church of St Helen's was a battleground, and overall it was the Puritan faction that held the initiative. It is not necessary to accept Richardson's description of a 'quire' of 2000 – though there is nothing inherently unlikely about such a figure – to recognise the hold that Puritan ideology had gained among the ordinary townfolk. If church bells could start ringing at dawn on a holiday, if St Helen's could be filled 'as full as it could thwack' for seven hours of sermons and the worshippers in their lunch break could still be imagined as singing 'sweet anthems to Jehova's name', if the market place could fill with townfolk communally belting out psalms and evidently enjoying it, if even Richardson himself could refer to the churches as 'Nicholas' and 'Helen's' without putting 'Saint' before the appellations, then it is plain that Puritan ways of thought and of behaviour had become a norm against which the conservatism of the Mayotts and the Bostocks, of Newstead and Stone, could be billed as innovative and unacceptable.

¹ David Cressy, *England on Edge: Crisis and revolution 1640-1642* (2006), pp. 292-3.

² John Richardson, *In honour of Abingdon, or on the seaventh day of Septembers solemnization* (Oxford, 1641). See Appx 2.

³ TNA, PROB 11/147

⁴ ATCA, Corp Minutes i fo. 148v

⁵ ATCA, Corp Minutes i fos. 161, 162.

⁶ He was a witness to the will of John Mayott 'the elder', in 1644, Berks RO D/ER T 154/2. He would continue as serjeant until his death in August 1663, when the St Nicholas registers record him as buried 'in the vestry'. The Corporation would then grant his estate 50s in exchange for his gown and cloak and any arrears of wages. – ATCA, Corp Minutes i fo. 194v.

⁷ John Adamson, *The Noble Revolt: the overthrow of Charles I* (2007), Chaps. 11 and 12.

⁸ *CJ*, ii, pp. 273-4 (27 August 1641); *LJ*, iv, p. 383 (30 August 1641).

⁹ 7 a.m was not unreasonably early; people would normally be up and about by 5 a.m. – D.M. Palliser, 'Civic mentality and the environment in Tudor York', in Jonathan Barry (ed), *The Tudor and Stuart Town* (1990), pp. 206-243 at p. 215.

¹⁰ Adamson, *The Noble Revolt*, pp. 353-4.

¹¹ The social fragmentation that preceded the Civil War is well described by Cressy, *England on Edge*.

¹² BL, Thomason Tracts, 669 f.3[14], and see also Anon, *The orders from the House of Commons for the Abolishing of Superstition and Innovation* (1 September 1641); Adamson, *The Noble Revolt*, pp. 355-361, 384-390; Conrad Russell, *The Fall of the British Monarchies 1637-1642* (1991), p. 371; A. Fletcher, *The Outbreak of the English Civil War* (1981), pp. 119-120.

¹³ Unlike, for instance, those of the strongly puritanical village of Longworth, a few miles from Abingdon – Bodleian, 'Collections for illustrating the history of Berkshire', Ms Top Berks c.57, p. 108.

¹⁴ For a description of the cross, said to be the finest in the country outside London, see M.J.H. Liversidge, 'Abingdon's 'Right Goodly Cross of Stone' in W.J.H. and M.J.H. Liversidge, *Abingdon Essays: Studies in Local History* (Abingdon, 1989), pp. 42-57. Richardson shows his polemical intent by describing his opponents as separatists, thus identifying the majority of the Puritans, who wished to reform the established church rather than separating from it, with an extremist minority.

¹⁵ David Cressy, 'The Downfall of Cheapside Cross: Vandalism, Ridicule and Iconoclasm' in idem, *Agnes Bowker's Cat: Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England* (2000), pp. 234-250. The Cheapside Cross would be demolished in an elaborate civic ritual in 1643.

¹⁶ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England* (Princeton, 1962-70), II p. 279.

¹⁷ 1 Chr 16:9-10; 2 Samuel 6:6-23.

¹⁸ Ezra 3:10.

¹⁹ 1 Chr 16:29.

²⁰ Nehemiah 13:40. Nehemiah was cup-bearer to King Artaxerxes, who had authorised the return to Zion.