

Account of Purley on Thames

Reverend William Gostwick

R200673 7/7/2019

Articles by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook articles 104 and 105 published in PPN January and February 1992

Rev. William Gostwick, Rector of Purley

The Rev. William Gostwick was Rector of Purley for 35 years from 1684 until his death in 1719. There have been 56 clergy in Purley from the 13th century to date and only 4 served longer than this.

A Devon man, William was born about 1643 at the height of the Civil War, son of Rev. Gabriel Gostwick, MA, of North Tawton and May Bovey of Staverton who were married in 1636. He grew up during stirring historical times: he was 6 years old when Charles I was executed and 17 when the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell came to an end and Charles II was restored to the throne. At 18 he matriculated and entered Exeter College, Oxford University, where he gained a degree (B.A.) in 1664. He then went on to Sydney Sussex College, Cambridge, and got his Master's degree (M.A.) in 1669.

By 1672 he was living in Newbury and on 22nd August that year he married Mrs. Anne Johnson in Winchester Cathedral, Hampshire. On 13th January the following year, on the recommendation of the Bishop of Bath and Wells, he was elected master of Reading Grammar School, the previous master, Thomas Ireland, having been removed because he was a lunatic. He held this post for 13 years.

into an "assignment before marriage" with Jane Hawkins of Chippenham, Wiltshire. She was the widow of Adam Hawkins and administrator of her late husband's estate which consisted of a mansion house, 7 cottages and about 300 acres of land in Chippenham. Jane was buried in the chancel at Purley in December 1704.

On 27th November 1684 the Rev. William Gostwick was inducted as Rector of Purley just seven days after his predecessor, Rev. Thomas Blagrove, was buried. Reading Reference Library have a copy of a sermon by Rev. Gostwick entitled "The Christian Merchant Described". It was printed in 1696 for B. Aylmer at the Three Pigeons in Cornhill, London.

He continued as master of Reading School until 1687. It is possible that some of the grooms who apparently travelled long distances to marry in Purley during his incumbency were former pupils - many came from Reading and other Berkshire parishes and some from as far away as London, Surrey and Wiltshire.

In the pages of the parish register he continued a list of Churchwardens and Overseers started in 1662, as well as recording all the baptisms, marriages and burials, as he was bound to do by ecclesiastical law. He also noted other information. This included a dispute at the manorial Court Leet of the Honour of Wallingford which was held in Tidmarsh in 1707 when George Blagrove, son of the former rector who was renting St. John's Farm (i.e. Purley Magna), accused him of not having a bull available for the use of the parish. He consulted the Lord Chancellor of Ireland who suggested that the Court Rolls should be checked. This was done by Moses Burley, attorney of Reading who, finding no such custom was recorded, advised the matter be dropped.

Then in September 1711 Mrs. Mary Blagrove of St. John's Farm, George's widow, refused to pay the tithe (tenth of the value) assess

on a second crop of clover from a field in Purley called 'Goodboys

Wheatham". It was a new crop and she didn't want to start the custom of paying tithes on that "particular sort of grasse". However, Rev. Gostwick spoke to her son, Thomas Blagrove, an attorney in Reading, and about a year later she agreed to pay the 15 shillings (75p).

In addition to these problems with the Blagrove family, in 1711 Rev. Gostwick also recorded the names and properties of all those parishioners who were responsible for the maintenance of the rails surrounding the churchyard. This is a unique Purley document listing the householders at the time and gives details of how long each section of rails was and how it was constructed.

Rev. Gostwick is known to have had at least three daughters, Mary, Elizabeth and Jane, but further research is needed to establish when and where they were born. Mary, the widow of Philip Beddoes of Whitechapel, London, was buried in Purley in 1715 aged 43. Elizabeth married Thomas Hatch in 1699 and they had two children, John and Margaret. Jane, probably the youngest and favourite daughter, married John Stevens of St. Peters in the East, Oxford in 1704 at Purley. Her father noted the birth of a grandson, Henry on 17th October 1709 at "12 of ye clock at night (in) St. Peters in ye East in ye City of Oxford" in the parish register and baptised the baby in Purley 5 days later; their other child was also called Jane.

In May 1716, William was apparently taken ill as in his Will, written on 8th May, he describes himself as being "something indisposed as to my bodily health but of sound mind and memory". He appointed two Reading friends, John Merrick, Doctor in Physick and Robert Deane apothecary, to be his Executors and, after bequeathing 20s (£1) to each of his sons-in-law to buy a mourning ring, divided his estate between his two married daughters, Elizabeth and Jane and, after their deaths, to his four grandchildren. He died in St. Mary's parish in Reading and was buried in Purley on 24th October 1719.

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More of the Life and Times of Rev. William Gostwick

Rev. William Gostwick, Rector of Purley for 35 years, lived from ?1643 until 1719. He lived during the reigns of six Stuart monarchs and the first of the Hanoverians: Charles I (beheaded 1649), Charles II (1660-1685), James II (1685-88), William III (d.1702) and Mary II (died 1694) and Ann (d.1714) were all Stuarts; and George I, the first of the Hanoverian kings, who came to the throne in 1714.

William probably spent his childhood during the Commonwealth in Devon. After the restoration of the monarchy and the Church of England in 1660, he went to Oxford and then to Cambridge Universities where he obtained an MA. It is possible that whilst at Cambridge he may have met the philosopher Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) who is famous for discovering gravity when he watched an apple fall out of a tree in his mother's orchard. By the time William got his degree, London had been ravaged with the plague in 1665 and the Great Fire in 1666.

In Reading during the Commonwealth period, many people had abandoned the parish churches and formed Nonconformist groups: the Baptists and Quakers date their foundation to the 1650s and the Independents (Congregationalists) from the 1660s. However, before William Gostwick came to teach in Reading School in 1673, laws

had been passed forbidding meetings of more than 5 dissenters and their ministers were barred from coming closer than 5 miles of the town. As a result many, and especially the Quakers, suffered horrendous persecutions at the hands of the town's constables. In addition, only those who took Communion in accordance with the Established Church of England were allowed to hold public office, go to university or enter a profession, e.g. lawyer.

In the years following the Restoration in 1660, Reading was in the doldrums. The wool trade had declined and the inhabitants impoverished as a result of several occupations by the opposing armies. The soldiers did a great deal of damage, ate all available food and demanded horses and money etc. from their "hosts". However, the town lies in a good trading position and prosperity was gradually restored.

THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION AND THE READING FIGHT

William had been Rector of Purley for a year when Charles II died in 1685 and his Catholic brother, James II, came to the throne. The Church of England and the Nonconformists united in their hatred of the Catholics and invited William of Orange, James' Protestant nephew and son-in-law to come to England. What followed is known as the "Glorious Revolution" and was achieved with little or no bloodshed.

William landed in Torbay on 4th November 1688 and marched towards London with his Dutch army plus others who joined along the way. James' army consisting mainly of Irish Catholics was waiting at Hounslow Heath near London and an advance guard was sent to Reading to intercept William.

The inhabitants of Reading were terrified and a rumour rapidly spread that the Irish Catholic soldiers were going to plunder the town and massacre them all during Sunday morning service. Many escaped despite the guard put on the roads. The Dutch were

expected along the Bath Road and so the Irish were positioned in Castle Hill with musketeers behind St. Mary's churchyard wall, more troops in Broad Street and the Market Place and a lookout up St. Mary's Church tower.

However, the Dutch had been warned and on Sunday, 10th December 1688 the troops turned north off the Bath Road, crossed over the fields and entered Reading by Pangbourne Lane (now the Oxford Road). As their approach had been hidden by hedges, they took the Irish by surprise and quickly chased them out of town towards Twyford with minimum casualties. It is a matter of some speculation if some of the soldiers came through Purley. Thus ended the "Reading Fight" which was celebrated for about 100 years by ringing the church bells on the anniversary.

Following the Coronation of William III and Mary II (daughter of James II and his 1st wife Ann Hyde), an act was passed in 1689 allowing the Nonconformists freedom of worship.

If William Gostwick had called on his London publisher about his sermon in 1696, he would have been the partially completed St. Paul's Cathedral. By the following year the Choir was opened and then a tangle of scaffolding and tarred cloths was erected to hide from view the magnificent dome that Sir Christopher Wren planned but which was opposed by the authorities. The building was under construction from 1675 and not finally completed until 1711.

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