

Pitney and its Register Book.

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A LONG narrow envelope of yellow discoloured sheepskin, 19 inches by 7, containing 26 narrow slips of coarse parchment, sewn together to form the pages of a book, has on its cover the inscription—"The Regester Booke of Pitney." This, the earliest Register of the parish of Pitney, only dates from 1623, yet amongst the records of 111 years there are many curious and interesting entries that seem worth preserving. For those were stirring times, those days of the 17th century, and even in remote villages the tramp of armed men and the echoes of the shouts of battle from the plain or the hills around, brought home to the hearts, even of simple country folk, those great events that were making the history of England.

But we look in vain in the book before us for any record connected with the battles fought in the neighbourhood. We might have expected to find, under the year 1645, some entry of names of those who had been wounded at the battle of Aller Moor, four miles away, and had managed to crawl to this village to die. That fugitives did find shelter here however, is a fact. In the village to this day is shewn a large oak table, underneath which two men who had fled from the fight at Aller concealed themselves. The story is told how the frightened company who were at supper kept their places at the table, beneath which the fugitives had hidden themselves, while the Parliamentary soldiers made their futile search.

But though Pitney appears to have escaped the ravages of

battle both during the Civil war and the Rebellion of Monmouth, it was marked out as its prey by that terrible scourge, the Plague.

Three times during this century the Register bears record of its visitation—in 1641, 1661, and 1666.

“In the yeare 1641, Anno regni Charoli the Seventeenth, in the tyme of ye plague were buried four persons in gardens.”

And in 1661 another entry states, “In 14 weekes were buried 17 inhabitants of Pitney.” In the list that follows are the names of “three brothers buried in one grave.”—“The widdow Paull and her servant boy.”—“James Hooper and his wife.”—“Amos Westlake the elder and his wife.” And on August 15th, the only dated entry, “was buried Elizabeth Andrews the wife of Thomas Andrews, sen., of the age of fourscore and three, in the churchyard of Pitney, and her husband.”

The last record of the Plague is in 1666:—

“John Pavyer died ye 29th day of december and was buried in a field in the parish of Lymmington by his owne brother Thomas, no minister present at the place. Thomas Pavyer died and was buried in the field at the parish of Lymmington by [*i.e.* near] his brother John, and their servant John Martine with him January 24th.”

In the year 1667 occurs the following:—

“Thomas Ellise fell sick on Thursday and dyed on fryday and was buried at Hewish on Sunday the 4th of February.”

And in the same year:—

“Richard Roper the tything man of Pitney dyed and was buryed in the churchyard of the same parish, *never consecrated*, nor any minister present at the place.”

During the times of the Civil war, the faithful priest of Pitney was one Cannanuel Bernard, M.A., who held besides, for some time, the two neighbouring cures of Huish Episcopi and Langport. We meet his name often in this Register, during the 43 years that he continued Rector, for he was very

fond of entering remarks of a personal nature or relating to his family. Such for instance is the following amongst the burials for 1667 :—

“Elizabeth, the daughter of Cannanuel Bernard, minister, of the age of forty years, the wife of Mr. Thomas Sherwood, the under Sheriff of Sōmersetshire, died in Sōmerton Saint Matthew’s eve September 20th and was buried in the church September the 27th.”

Other personal references are :—

“1662, was buried December 11th Joane Roche who was my family servante sixteen years.”

“1649. Richard Bernard the sone of Cannanuel Bernard and Dorothy his wife, being the 20th child betwixt them lawfully begotten was baptized December 16th.”

One can fancy the aged father’s feelings as he penned the following entry in 1664 :—

“John Cattle and Dorothy Bernard the youngest daughter of Mr. Cannanuel Bernard, Minister of Pitney, were married unknown unto him the 30 day of July in the Parish Church of Pitney by William Baker, Vicar of Hewish.”

His sense of humour the following entry in his hand-writing will testify :—

“1659. Mr. Hymbury of Mark and Mrs. Joyce Ball of Langport marry’d July 19th of 60 years old apiece. The man made her his fourth wife, the woman made him the fourth husband.”

Cannanuel Bernard died in 1668, and his death is thus recorded in the Register :—

“In the year of our Lord, 1668, Mr. Cannanuel Bernard, Rector, departed this life the 9 day of November and was bury’d the 10 day of December in the Chansill of the parish church of Pitney, who was the minister of the parish of Pitney 43 years and 3 quarters.”

A slab of stone within the Altar rails of the Church marks the spot where he lies, “in Pitney clods of clay,” as the in-

scription runs. It seems strange that he should have remained unburied for more than a month, and a curious fact came to light during the restoration of the Chancel twenty years ago that would seem to point to the fact that the body had been embalmed. When the grave was opened the body was discovered without coffin in a perfect state of preservation. On exposure to the air, however, it crumbled to dust in a few minutes.

During the whole time of the Commonwealth the services in the little Church were carried on without let or hindrance. Very likely the position of the village, lying away from the high road, caused it to be overlooked.

Without doubt the most interesting feature of this old Register is the marriage portion of it, during the days of the Commonwealth, and for ten years after. People flocked to this little Church there to be joined together in Matrimony with the rites and ceremonies of their own beloved Church of England. It seemed to be a matter of notoriety that the Minister of Pitney used the forbidden Liturgy without fear.

Bernard became Rector in 1625. From that year till 1643 the number of marriages never exceeded five per annum, often there being but one recorded. From 1643 to 1647 occurs a blank, the years being simply recorded with no entries. From 1648 to 1650 inclusive there are seven recorded marriages, but in 1651 the number suddenly rises to 22 and the same number in the following year. In 1653 19 are entered and then occurs a blank till 1658, when 15 are recorded. In 1659 there are 31, and in 1660 the astonishing number of 50 marriages is recorded. In 1664 only one is entered, in 1665 two, but in 1666 44 marriages took place. In 1669 the number dropped to two. The total number of marriages recorded in this Register between 1648 and 1672 inclusive is 279, and remembering that a break occurs of four years, and that in 1648 and 1664 only two are entered, the average number per annum is very high.

The contracting parties came from all parts of the neigh-

bourhood; 85 parishes are represented. Somerton heads the list with 92; Langport sends 45; High Ham, 43; Kingsbury Episcopi, 34; Pitney itself furnishes 26 of the contracting parties; Long Sutton and Curry Rivell, 26; Huish Episcopi, 24. Taunton, Wells (4), Glastonbury (2), Bridgwater (2), Weymouth, Sherborne (2), Lyme, and Gillingham are all represented.

It will be noticed that the great number of these marriages took place whilst Bernard was Rector. He died in 1668, and in 1669 the number recorded fell to two only. Whence then came the popularity of Pitney? Was it that Bernard married without asking troublesome questions, or did he undersell his neighbours in the matter of fees?

It appears highly probable however, that though these marriages were many of them performed at Pitney, yet that some took place in other parishes and were entered in the Pitney book. It seems to me a very likely thing that the Marriage Register from 1650 to 1668 is not the Marriage Register so much of the parish of Pitney, as of Cannanuel Bernard, Rector of Pitney. Not only did he marry any one who came to him, but he was willing to go into other parishes and perform the ceremony there also—entering every marriage he performed in the Register book of his own parish of Pitney.

This would seem to be confirmed by certain entries found scattered here and there in the records of the twenty-four years.

(a) On November 8th, 1659, three marriages took place, the contracting parties being of Long Sutton.

(b) On May 28th, 1660, two marriages took place, and here it is expressly stated that they took place “*at Somerton;*” one being “*at the almes house at Somerton.*”

(c) On April 25th, 1668, three marriages are recorded, the contracting parties being all of Kingsbury.

(d) On June 23rd, of the same year, two marriages are entered, the contracting parties being of Weston Zoyland.

(e) And in 1659 and 1660 it is recorded that certain marriages were performed “*at Langport.*”

We are quite certain, then, that in the cases of (b) and (e) the ceremony was *not* performed in Pitney Church. Might it not in (a) have been performed at Long Sutton, in which place the three parties were living; and in (c) at Kingsbury; and in (d) at Weston Zoyland?

And if in these particular cases, why not in many others throughout the long list?

A similar occurrence may be met with in the Marriage Register of Maperton, near Wincanton, where between 1690 and 1695 the number of marriages increased enormously—twenty being celebrated in one year.

Once or twice we meet an entry that brings before us the reality of those dreadful days of tyranny, when to use the Liturgy was a crime that meant possible imprisonment:—“September 12th 1660. William Maisters of Ashill and Elizabeth Paul of Buckland St. Mary marry’d by a Justice of the Peace five years before.”

No doubt there were many who, though they complied with the law enforcing civil marriage, when happier days dawned on their Church went through the marriage service, and received their Church’s blessing on their union.

But from the marriage part of this old Register let us pass on to that which records the burials in the parish. Some extracts I have already given, showing the prevalence of epidemics in 1641, 1661, and 1666, and the habit of burying at such times in fields and gardens.

In order to encourage the woollen trade, in the reign of Charles II, an Act was passed that all bodies should be wrapped in material of that kind and so buried, under a penalty of £5. In this Register we find many entries to the effect that the law had been complied with. Let the first serve as a sample of the rest:—“1678. John Parker was buried the 2nd of October. Memorandum, that an affidavit of the burial

of him in woollen only was brought unto mee the 3rd of October.”

Edward Walford, in his paper on this subject, read before the British Archæological Association, stated that the custom of burial in woollen only, lasted till the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the Register before us, no mention of it occurs after 1726.

The custom may be traced back to Saxon times, for Saxon warriors were buried in linen, and the common people in woollen.

The form of certificate may sometimes be met with in old Prayer Books printed at the end of last century. It runs thus:—“I, A.B., of the parish of C., in the city of D., make oath that the body of E.F., of the parish of G., was not wrapped or put in any sheet, shirt, shift, or coffin, lined, faced, or covered with any materials contrary to a late Act of Parliament, nor with anything but what was made of sheep’s wool only. As witness my hand.”

One meets very constantly some singular Christian name. *Cannanuel*, the Christian name of the Rector during the Commonwealth, is not commonly met with; nor are *Archelaus* and *Rainole*, sons of one Hercules Rugg, of common occurrence. *Love* and *Melody* are names of two daughters; and such scripture names as *Abia* and *Tryphena* occur very frequently in this Register.

During the 100 years, 1623 to 1722, there are recorded:—405 baptisms; 431 marriages; 270¹ burials. In the years 1714 and 1719, it is stated that “none were born” in these

¹Since writing the above, I have found at the bottom of the parish chest an overseers’ book dating back to 1620, in a very dilapidated condition. On looking through it, I discovered that amongst the accounts of rates and payments were entries of burials in the parish for the years 1683, 1684, and 1686. It would seem that the Register book was mislaid during those years, and that this account book was used instead. The baptisms are entered in the Register for one year only, 1684, and appear to have been copied afterwards from some other record, but the burials having been inserted in the overseers’ book were overlooked. This fact will raise the number of burials mentioned above to 291.

years, and between 1684 and 1694 several entries of baptisms have been cut out.

It may be interesting to compare the above figures with the following, representing the century 1723 to 1822:—534 baptisms; 133 marriages; 354 burials.

Under date 1636 is entered a “Record of Bridgwater Sessions.” It appears that a complaint was made that the rates and taxes within the Hundred of Pitney were unequally distributed. Accordingly the Court of Wells issued a “reference unto Sir John Stowell, Bart., Arthur Pyne, and William Walrond, or to any two of them, to examine a difference betweene ye inhabitants of the Hundred of Pitney concerning ye inequality of their rates and taxes within the said Hundred, and to settle an order therein if possibly they could.”

Sir John Stowell and William Walrond, in accordance with this “reference,” met and re-valued the land in the Hundred. “They found that the Tythings of Pitney and Knoll are upon an indifferent valuation worthe neare an eleven hundred pounds pr. annum; and the tythings of Mutchelney, Middleney, and Langport are upon ye like vallew, worth two thousand pounds pr. annum at the least.”

So they “thought fitt” that the rates and taxes of the whole Hundred being divided into three equal parts—Pitney and Knowle should pay one part, and Muchelney, Langport, and Middleney should pay the other two parts.

And this order was confirmed at the Sessions at Bridgwater in 1636.
