

Who wrote “a fool’s bolt”? a tale of two Somerset rectors

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WHO WROTE “A FOOL’S BOLT ...”? A TALE OF TWO SOMERSET RECTORS

JOHN RICHARDS

INTRODUCTION

In 1722, the celebrated antiquarian and diarist, Thomas Hearne, was puzzling over two manuscripts he had been lent by James West of Balliol College, Oxford.¹ Both manuscripts were anonymous, but written in the same hand and so assumed to have the same author, who styled himself ‘Philantiquarius Britannicus’.

The first manuscript, *A Discourse about some Roman Antiquities Discover’d near Conquest in Somersetshire*, concerned two urns full of Roman coins dug up in 1666, a claim for the place where the Roman conquest of Britain was completed, and a history of Viking invasions of the county.

The second was entitled *A Fool’s Bolt soon Shot at Stonage* and made some bold statements about the origins of Stonehenge. In this remarkable essay the author sets out his theories with considerable energy. Philantiquarius starts by describing how a visitor to Rome, who is found to know nothing of Stonehenge (the Stonage of the title), is ejected and told to go and find out about it. He rails against the general lack of knowledge about the site, but so many people have given their views on Stonehenge that Philantiquarius does not see why he should not have a go himself and shoot his own bolt. He hopes to provoke his friends to do likewise, hoping, that someone, “by art or accident, shall hit the mark.”

At the time there were several theories about the origins of Stonehenge, including that it was built by the Romans, the Danes, or even Phoenicians. Philantiquarius conjectures, via some very spurious etymology, that Stonehenge is an old British temple, erected to the Goddess of victory, and site of a battle won by Stanega and his army of Somerset giants, the Cangi, against the King of the Belgae. He ridicules the opinion of Inigo Jones that Stonehenge is Roman², calling him “Out-I-go Jones”. He refers to Jones for description, but says he has overdone it with all his Greek architectural terms and his book could have been much shorter.

John Fowles has described *A Fool’s Bolt ...* as

“a splendid piece of English bile” which pokes fun at overly serious antiquarians, but with some shrewd observations mixed in with the word play and myths.³

IDENTIFYING PHILANTIQUARIUS BRITANNICUS

Hearne did not know the name of the author and thought the two manuscripts were “very faulty”, containing errors that would need correction, but felt they should be published. The spelling was “singular” as were the author’s opinions, but Hearne did have one clue: he knew the theory that Stonehenge was a British temple erected to the Goddess of Victory had already appeared in print in Gibson’s 1695 revision of *Britannia*⁴, where it was attributed to an anonymous manuscript in the possession of Mr Andrew Paschall, who had been Rector of Chedzoy, near Bridgwater.

Andrew Paschall had died in 1697, so Hearne wrote to Thomas Coney, Paschall’s successor at Chedzoy. Coney replied⁵ that Paschall’s papers had been sent to Dr Roger Maunders⁶ (or Mander) of Balliol on his death, thus suggesting how they had come into the possession of James West at the same college.

Hearne also knew that a list of sources in the 1695 *Britannia* included mention of another manuscript on Stonehenge (“A short Treatise upon the same Subject was written by Mr. John Gibbons. MS.”) but did not say any more about its contents. Perhaps this might be the *Fool’s Bolt*. John Gibbons, or Gibbon (1629-1718), had held the post of Bluemantle in the College of Heralds. Gibbon was a staunch royalist, who manipulated astrological predictions in support of James II. He is said to have behaved arrogantly towards his colleagues as he believed his future was totally pre-ordained and so unaffected by his behaviour. In 1709 Hearne had written that Gibbon had a “great Character” as a herald and Latinist, but “not withstanding this, I take him to be a whimsical

and craz'd Person".⁷ By 1725, Hearne's opinion had not improved greatly. He did not believe the Stonage article was by John Gibbon as there was more learning in it than he gave Gibbon credit for. Also a search of Gibbon's papers had failed to turn up anything original relating to Stonehenge.

The true identity of Philantiquarius was proving hard to pin down. Thomas Hearne decided to publish the manuscripts anyway and they were included in one of the two volumes of *Peter Langtoft's Chronicle* in 1725.⁸

The questions remained as to the author's identity and how Paschall had come by the manuscripts.

THE RECTOR OF CHEDZOY

Andrew Paschall (c. 1631–1696) was at Queens' College Cambridge throughout the Commonwealth; he became a Fellow in 1653 and had to reapply for his fellowship after the Restoration. It seems he married soon after,⁹ which meant resigning his fellowship, and in 1663 he became Rector of Chedzoy, in the Somerset Levels close to Bridgwater, a place remote from the intellectual circles he craved.¹⁰

In September 1683, Andrew Paschall wrote to John Aubrey saying he had received some fine pieces of antiquity from the district.¹¹ This is the first recorded mention of the two anonymous manuscripts. On 5 October, he wrote again, describing a manuscript on two urns full of Roman coins dug up in 1666 and another about Stonehenge and Bath.¹² However, Paschall did not divulge anything about their authorship.

Aubrey does not seem to have shown any interest in the manuscripts, and Paschall turned his mind to other things: devising a scheme to mine gold in Somerset¹³ and trying to enlist Aubrey's support in the venture.¹⁴ Then, in July 1685, the Battle of Sedgemoor took place on Paschall's doorstep and he wrote a detailed account of the battle. He subsequently spent some time in jail – possibly he was suspected of rebel sympathies, although he was loyal to King James, or perhaps something went wrong with the gold mining – and in April 1686 he wrote to Aubrey, mentioning the "long confinement ... endured in the great Prison."¹⁵

It was not until 1689 that Paschall reminded Aubrey about the manuscripts, and this time Aubrey took notice.¹⁶ Aubrey must have asked for the name of the author, because in 1690 Paschall wrote it was a "Mr ... Jay of Nettlecombe". This letter has not

survived, so we have to rely on a marginal note by Aubrey:

"Mr Paschal's letter – The author of the Bolt soon Shott, was one Mr. Jay of Nettlecombe lyeing in the western parts of Somersetshire, deceased (I think) 14 or 16 years since.

Yours &c. A.P.

Wells, April 7, 1690"¹⁷

Aubrey did nothing more with the information and there is no evidence that he ever saw the manuscripts, but in about 1693 he was approached by the twenty-year-old Thomas Tanner who had been given the responsibility for revisions to the Wiltshire section of *Camden's Britannia*. Tanner persuaded Aubrey to show him his unpublished work¹⁸ and it appears it was from this that the information was obtained that subsequently appeared in *Britannia*.

Although *Britannia* did not mention Mr Jay, later scholars did rediscover Aubrey's note.¹⁹ There was just one problem: there did not appear to have been a Mr Jay in Nettlecombe in the relevant years. However, the rector was one Robert Gay.²⁰

THE RECTOR OF NETTLECOMBE

Robert Gay (1602–1672) was an interesting character. In 1621 he was listed as a plebeian from Somerset at Magdalen Hall, Oxford, graduating as BA in 1624. He was ordained a deacon and priest in 1625 and appointed Preacher at Cary Deanery the following year. He obtained an MA in 1627. In 1629 he became the curate at Chelwood and six months later was the Rector at Nettlecombe.²¹ He married his wife, Martha, at some point before they reached Nettlecombe, and they had at least eight children.²²

Nettlecombe is in the eastern foothills of Exmoor. The church is adjacent to the manor house, Nettlecombe Court, and the village would have been close by, but it had been completely removed by 1800 as the result of improvements to the park. Nettlecombe Court was the home of the Trevelyan family from the 15th century until recent times.

With the coming of the Civil War, Robert Gay was an ardent supporter of the Parliamentary cause. In 1643, he led a group of men in an attack on Nettlecombe Court, the home of a royalist officer, Sir George Trevelyan, setting fire to outhouses and trying to destroy the main building. Gay was

thrown into prison but subsequently released and allowed to remain as Rector.²³ One imagines relations between the manor house and the church were somewhat strained. Gay later claimed to have taken part in additional military actions in Taunton and other places.²⁴

In 1655 Robert Gay was travelling to London when he fell in with a clergyman, Bernard Wayte, who had been ejected from his ministry at Exford by Colonel John Pyne. He explained he was on his way to London to try to get it back as Pyne was now out of favour, whereas he was much favoured by Colonel John Gorges, who would assist in his reinstatement.²⁵ Gay realised he had met Wayte before (not surprisingly, as Exford and Nettlecombe are just 16 miles apart) and suspected him of having royalist sympathies, so he tried to entrap him by discussing the Scottish invasion and the Battle of Worcester. Wayte revealed that he thought that the king of Scots (Charles II) was innocent of any crime. Gay wrote to John Thurloe, Secretary of State, denouncing Wayte and saying he suspected him of involvement in the recent insurrection in the West (Penruddock's Uprising). Wayte was arrested in Taunton on suspicion of high treason, but he survived to become Rector at Exford again at the Restoration.²⁶

Somehow, Gay himself managed to remain Rector of Nettlecombe after the Restoration, but he neglected his duties in his final two years. His successor at Nettlecombe, William Griffin, noted in the parish register that Gay had failed to register a number of baptisms or burials.²⁷ Gay died in December 1672.

IDENTIFYING THE AUTHOR

Some clues can be extracted from the manuscripts themselves. We know that the manuscripts were in existence by 1683, when Paschall first mentioned them to Aubrey. The Roman coins manuscript cannot have been written earlier than 1666, the year the urns were discovered, and the *Fool's Bolt* cannot be earlier than 1670, as that date is mentioned in a footnote. For Gay to have been the author, the *Fool's Bolt* had to have been written between 1670 and his death in 1672, the period when he was neglecting his duties by failing to make entries in the parish registers.

Although both manuscripts contain a large number of dubious place name etymologies, the author obviously knew Somerset well (though his

knowledge of Roman coins was poor).²⁸ Robert Gay knew the area very well indeed. He was born in Somerset and probably spent his childhood there. He spent three years in the Cary Deanery as a Preacher, so would have toured the villages in the area of Castle Cary and South Cadbury. In his time at Chelwood, he would have got to know Stanton Drew which is just three miles away (the *Fool's Bolt* contains one of the two earliest descriptions of the site – the other is by Aubrey). During the Civil War he was engaged in military actions in Taunton and other places.

However, no definite compositions of his exist except for the letter informing on Bernard Wayte. There is no evidence that he had any antiquarian interests, or that he ever met Paschall. If Robert Gay was the author then the only evidence appeared to be the one misspelt name.

A BROTHER NEAR BATH

The *Discourse about some Roman Antiquities* provides the crucial clue. Philantiquarius writes in a footnote that his brother lives near Bath, and in his grounds he found a stone coffin and a Roman coin.²⁹ Fortunately, Robert Gay did have such a brother. The *Visitation of Somerset in 1672*³⁰ records that Robert Gay was the son of Robert Gay of Bathampton and had three brothers, at least two of which had estates near Bath: John Gay of Newton St. Loe and Richard Gay of South Stoke, both places lying to the south and west of Bath. It is an area where finds of Roman stone coffins are not uncommon, being close to Bath and crossed by the Fosse Way: at least three have been found in the area in more recent times. Either John or Richard could be the described brother. This seems to confirm beyond reasonable doubt that Robert Gay was Philantiquarius Britannicus.

There is an intriguing footnote to this story. In the 1640s, the area of Somerset around Bath was known for its political and religious radicalism.³¹ Somerset was controlled from 1645 by the County Committee, which was run by Colonel John Pyne, a radical who wanted godly reformation and restrictions on royal prerogative. The Committee sequestered the estates of defeated royalists and imposed fines. It collected taxes, took charge of the militia and had responsibility for law and order until new magistrates could be appointed. It ousted 'unsuitable' clergy from their posts. The moderate Presbyterians hated the county

committees; the Somerset one, in particular, was notoriously vindictive, and hounded royalists and harassed political opponents.³² In 1646, new county subcommittees of accounts were set up by the Committee of Accounts in London to perform local audits, which could be embarrassing for county committees with instances of corruption to conceal. Pyne was unable to prevent the members of the Somerset sub-committee being appointed by one of his opponents, William Prynne, but he set to work to win them over. One of his converts was a man known as John Gay of Englishcombe. Later, when Pyne decided to pack juries to ensure the right result, Gay was one of his chosen men, and he also arranged for Gay to be appointed to the Assessment Commission which had taken over some of the fiscal powers of the County Committee, and to the Commission of the Peace.³³ Pyne strongly opposed the Instrument of Government which created the Protectorate, so when Cromwell became Lord Protector at the end of 1653, Pyne's career went into decline and so did those of his acolytes, including John Gay. In 1657 the Commission of the Peace was purged, and out went John Gay and Pyne's other men to be replaced by moderates.³⁴

Although Gay is a common name in the area, it is very possible that this John Gay of Englishcombe is the same man as John Gay of Newton St. Loe, whose grandfather and great-grandfather were both "of Englishcombe".³⁵ The parish of Englishcombe is bordered by Newton St. Loe to the west and South Stoke to the east and was an area of political and religious radicalism.³⁶

Colonel Pyne was, of course, the man who ejected Bernard Wayte from his post at Exford. When Wayte met Robert Gay on the way to London and revealed his hatred of Pyne, he may have been indirectly attacking Robert's own brother.

HOW DID PASCHALL ACQUIRE THE MANUSCRIPTS?

Since Legg's research it has been generally accepted that Robert Gay and Philantiquarius Britannicus are one and the same, based on Andrew Paschall's statement that the manuscripts were written by a Mr Jay. The 'brother near Bath' footnote provides good corroboration for this being Robert Gay.

There remains the question of how the manuscripts passed from Robert Gay after his death in 1672 to Andrew Paschall in 1683. There is one interesting possibility. It could be that William

Griffin, Gay's successor as rector, found the manuscripts amongst the parish papers. Wondering what to do with them and knowing the chaplain at nearby Dunster Castle was interested in such curiosities, he could have passed them to him. The chaplain at the time was Paschall's friend, Roger Mander.³⁷ It would be very fitting if the man who was the recipient of the manuscripts from Paschall after his death was the man who supplied them to him originally.

REFERENCES

- 1 Thomas Hearne, *The Works of Thomas Hearne M.A. Vol. III, containing the first volume of Peter Langtoft's Chronicle* (Oxford, 1725), lxxix.
- 2 Inigo Jones, *The Most Notable Antiquity of Great Britain: Vulgarly Called Stone-Heng, on Salisbury Plain, Restored* (London, 1655).
- 3 John Fowles and Barry Brukoff, *The Enigma of Stonehenge* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), 95-96.
- 4 Edmund Gibson (ed.), *Camden's Britannia, newly translated into English: with large additions and improvements* (London, 1695).
- 5 Thomas Coney to Thomas Hearne, 1 Jun 1725, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Rawl. letters 4 fol. 504. Cited letters are accessible in Early Modern Letters Online (EMLO), Cultures of Knowledge, <http://emlo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>
- 6 Dr Roger Mander (or Maunders) (-1704) was Master of Balliol College, Oxford, from 1687 till just before his death, and was Vice-Chancellor of the University from 1700 to 1702.
- 7 C. E. Doble (ed.) *Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne, Vol. II (March 20, 1707–May 23, 1710)* (Oxford, 1886), 195.
- 8 Thomas Hearne, *The Works of Thomas Hearne M.A. Vol. IV, containing the second volume of Peter Langtoft's Chronicle* (Oxford, 1725), 440-517.
- 9 See Anthony Powell, *John Aubrey and his Friends* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1948), 67-69. A marriage licence was taken out in Essex on 12 June 1663 by 'Andrew Paschall' and 'Rebecca Wiseman'. Powell guesses that this is our Andrew Paschall. The date fits for the marriage and Andrew's wife is named as 'Rebekah' in his will drafted in 1685 (National Archives Prob/11/437/374) so it does seem extremely likely that this is the right couple. Powell also wonders if Rebecca could be the sister of the Mary Wiseman for whom John Aubrey fell on first sight in 1651. Mary's mother also had the name Rebecca.
- 10 Vivian Salmon, 'John Wilkins' Essay (1668): Critics and Continuers.' *Historiographia Linguistica*, 1(2) (1974), 147-163.

- ¹¹ Andrew Paschall to John Aubrey, 10 Sep 1683, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Aubrey 13, 59.
- ¹² Paschall to Aubrey, 5 Oct 1683, MS Aubrey 13, 63-64.
- ¹³ Paschall to Aubrey, 11 Nov 1684, MS Aubrey 13, 71-72.
- ¹⁴ Paschall to Aubrey, 5 May 1685, MS Aubrey 13, 73.
- ¹⁵ Paschall to Aubrey, 20 Apr 1686, MS Aubrey 13, 77.
- ¹⁶ Paschall to Aubrey, 4 Nov 1689, MS Aubrey 13, 83.
- ¹⁷ The note is reproduced in John Aubrey, *Monumenta Britannica, or, A miscellany of British antiquities*, Thomas Gale, John Evelyn, Rodney Legg, and John Fowles (eds.) (Sherborne: Dorset Publishing, 1980), 84, and Rodney Legg, *Stonehenge Antiquaries* (Sherborne: Dorset Publishing, 1986), 7.
- ¹⁸ Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), 336-9.
- ¹⁹ See, for example, John Thurnam, 'Examination of Barrows on the Downs of North Wiltshire, in 1853-57' *Wiltshire Archaeol Natur Hist Mag* 6 (1860), 317-336, at 327.
- ²⁰ This seems to have been first noticed by Harold St. George Gray, 'Battlegore, Williton' *SANH* 77 (1931), 7-36 at 9, and later, independently, by Legg, *op. cit.* note 21, 8.
- ²¹ Robert Gay (Person ID 56915), The Clergy of the Church of England Database 1540-1835, <http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk>, accessed 20 Aug 2015.
- ²² Legg, *op. cit.* note 17.
- ²³ See R. J. E. Bush, 'Nettlecombe Court', *Fld Stud* 3 (1970), 275-287, and W.C. Trevelyan and C. E. Trevelyan, *Trevelyan Papers, Vol 3* (London, 1872), xlv, xlv, 314-5.
- ²⁴ Thomas Birch, *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe, Vol 3* (1742), 280-1.
- ²⁵ This was not the whole story – Wayte had been the Curate at Minety, but the minister of Exford was being threatened with ejection by Parliament in 1647, so the two churchmen did a swap to try to bamboozle the authorities and the deception held for several years. See Fiona McCall, *Baal's Priests: The Loyalist Clergy and the English Revolution* (Ashgate Publishing, 2013), 234.
- ²⁶ Birch, *op. cit.* note 24, 693. Bernard Waight (Person ID 15952), The Clergy of the Church of England Database 1540-1835, *op. cit.* note 21.
- ²⁷ Legg, *op. cit.* note 17.
- ²⁸ F. Haverfield, 'Two Hoards of Roman Coins found in Somersetshire in 1666' *Archaeol J* 59 (1902), 342-5.
- ²⁹ Hearne, *op. cit.* note 8, 471.
- ³⁰ Edward Bysshe, *The Visitation of Somerset and the City of Bristol 1672*. New Series Volume 11, *The Publications of the Harleian Society*. (London: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1992), 6. Richard Gay was resident in the Manor House at South Stoke from at least 1662 until his death in late 1671 (see John Canvin, *Southstoke History* <http://www.southstokepc.org.uk/history/SouthStokeHistory.pdf>, accessed 25 Aug 2015, and R. Holworthy, *Dwelly's National Records, Vol. 1, Hearth Tax for Somerset 1664-5* (Fleet, 1916), 167).
- ³¹ John Wroughton, *A Community at War: The Civil War in Bath and North Somerset 1642-1650* (Bath: Lansdown Press, 1992), 5.
- ³² John Wroughton, *op. cit.* note 31, 168-171. David Underdown, *Somerset in the Civil War and Interregnum* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973), 121-9.
- ³³ Underdown, *op. cit.* note 32, 141-2, 150-1, 169.
- ³⁴ Underdown, *op. cit.* note 32, 185. David Underdown, "Settlement in the Counties, 1653-1658." in *The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement 1646-1660*, G.E. Aylmer (ed.), (London: Macmillan, 1972), 165-182 at 173.
- ³⁵ Bysshe, *op. cit.* note 30.
- ³⁶ Kerry Birch, "Richard Gay of Haycombe: An exploration of a story and its influence on local Baptist family and community history." *Baptist Quarterly* 37 (8) (1998): 367-385 at 375. Quakers were a particular force in Englishcombe; see Wroughton, *op. cit.* note 31, 183.
- ³⁷ R. T. Gunther, *Early Science in Oxford: Vol XII. Dr. Plot and the Correspondence of the Philosophical Society of Oxford* (Oxford, 1939), 283-6.

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