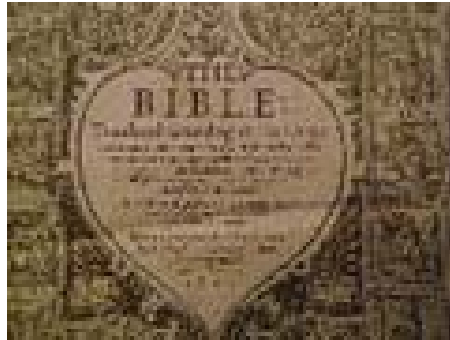


THE HELMDON BIBLE



In the summer of 2009, an old bible was found in a house in Maidenhead, Berkshire, when a friend was clearing out his mother's house. Knowing that I was interested in old books, he loaned it to me to look at. The bible appeared to be from the early 19th century, belonging to the family of the vicar of Helmdon Parsonage in Northamptonshire. However, subsequent research (and a stroke of luck) proved it to be over four hundred years old, and to have originated from Banbury in Oxfordshire.

This article, commissioned for the Helmdon village website, gives the details.

Read on to find out more !

© Katharine Ashley
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Folly Cottage
Ashton Keynes
Wilts

kath@walkersmill.fsnet.co.uk

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The 19th century Inscription – Helmdon (Northamptonshire)

Immediately I opened the bible I noticed some extremely faded inscriptions on the first few pages. These were details of the Jones family children, born between 1823 and 1845. The Reverend Pryce Jones, of Welsh descent as stated in the inscription, was the minister at Helmdon Parsonage.

The inscription was as follows.

My indentations are to try to make the generations clearer. The brackets are actually in the inscription :

“Pryce
the son of the
 Revd Pryce Jones curate of Helmdon
 (son of the
 Revd Pryce Jones vicar of Abthorpe
 (son of the
 Revd John Jones vicar of Llanwonog)
 and
 Sarah his wife
 the daughter of the
 Revd Samuel Jemson of Weedon - Beck)
and
Mary-Ann his wife
daughter of
 Edward Edmunds of Astwell

was born at Helmdon parsonage on Sunday 14th December 1823, at about 20 minutes past 10 o'clock A.M. Christened January 2nd.

Sarah Jemson daughter of the above Pryce and Mary-Ann Jones, born at Helmdon parsonage on Monday 13th June 1825, between 6 and 7 A.M. Christened August 21st.

John William Pryce their son born at Helmdon parsonage the 12th of ~~March~~ (KA - sic) February about 6 o'clock A.M. 1827. Christened August 6th.

Wednesday June 19th 1829. About seven o'clock in the Morning at Helmdon parsonage Anna Maria was born. Christened July 6th.

April 18th 1831. About five o'clock a.m. Henry Charles Pryce *born* ? Christened June 29

1833. Feb 26th Tuesday Morning one o'clock. Samuel Jemson Pryce was born. Christened March 22 1833.

1834. On Saturday Sept 6th 3 o'clock a.m. Margaret Jemima Jemson was born. Christened 3rd of June.

1836. July 7th about 9 o'clock p.m. Richard Pryce was born. Christened Sept 15th. (KA note - he died in 1840 and another baby born in 1840 has the same name).

1838. April 7th Saturday Philip Sydney Pryce about 11 o'clock a.m. Christened same day April 7 1838. (KA note - he died in 1840 and another baby born in 1843 has the same name).

1840. Wednesday January 8th ..

KA - A new page is then started :

Secundus Richard Pryce, born at Helmdon parsonage. 8th January 1840 about 1/2 past 9 a.m baptized 13th April 1840

April 5th 1842 about 2 o'clock P.M. a Still Born Boy

Saturday 24th June 1/2 past 5 a.m. at Helmdon parsonage Secundus Philip Sidney Pryce Jones (KA - sic) was born 1843, baptized 19th August 1843.

At Helmdon parsonage 1845 (KA - sic) on 5th June 1845 (Thursday) about 1/2 past 10 P.M. Amelia Emma Jemson baptized 27th July 1845. “

Catherine Pritchard has done a great deal of family research, including the Edmunds family and the subsequent fates of the Jones children from the inscription above. See Appendix 1. I will not include this information in this article as it is available elsewhere.

The 17th and 18th century Inscriptions – Banbury (Oxfordshire), Plumpton and Maidford (Northamptonshire)

This was all very interesting, but then I discovered something even more amazing about this bible. I was just looking through it to check my transcript of the 19th century inscriptions, when I thought I would look through the bible itself - up until now I had only checked the front few pages.

As you can see from the photograph of the first page of the bible on the Helmdon website (see Appendix 3), there is a date of 1607. Well, I thought that was just the date of the *version* of the bible, but I have discovered something which means that the actual book itself is really that old! Amazing to think it dates from only 4 years after Elizabeth the First died and is contemporary with Shakespeare's folios.

On a blank page facing "The first book of Moses called Genesis", page 1, are written the much earlier family inscriptions shown below. Genesis is normally at the beginning of a bible, but the bible was rebound in a different order in the 19th century, so that Genesis now follows the Book of Common Prayer. Photos of these earlier family inscriptions are on the internet, see Appendix 9.

Note I have put the inscriptions in a larger font, so that you can see the superscript letters more clearly. Also note the colons in the 17th century writing.

The first two inscriptions say the same thing. The second one is in a very old small hand, style and wording, consistent with being contemporary with 1613 :

" Mary daughter to Joⁿ : Bowerman was baptized y^e 13 day of September ano Do 1613."

Immediately above this, in a larger, later hand and wording, is written (notice the use of the word "the" rather than "ye") :

"Mary daughter to John Bowerman was baptized the 13th day of September 1613."

Below these two inscriptions are others :

"James : West : son of John West and Joyce was Born May y^e 5 and was Baptized y^e 9 of May : 1683"

"Samuel West son of James & Mary West was born July y^e 29th 1717"

"Sarah West wife of y^e above Sam^l: West Rec^{tor} of Maidford & Plumpton
in Northamptonshire 1753"

I have been able to find Maidford & Plumpton in my atlas and they are only a few miles from Helmdon.

Samuel West graduated from Oxford University, see Appendix 8,

“ West, Samuel, s. James, of Banbury, Oxon, gent. TRINITY COLL., matric. 13 May, 1737, aged 19. “

“Notes on a History of Plumpton”, P17, see Appendix 6, has some information on the Rev. Samuel West who was rector of Plumpton. In the margin there is an addendum from the author: “53/67” - perhaps this could be 1753/1767 and refer to the dates of his incumbency.

Part of the Plumpton history says of Samuel :

“...” His successor, Samuel West, also Vicar of Maidford, was a man of another mould. Though Plumpton was his lesser cure, he seems to have attended to it’s (KA - sic) clerical business, at any rate, with meticulous care. His entries in the registers are all precise and accurate. and he goes out of his way to note, in odd places, details of parish business and affairs. For example, he notes on the flyleaf the name of the Churchwarden in whose day it was begun, and he notes, on the flyleaf, the fact that the Lesson Charity was received and distributed in the year 1755. This Charity was founded in the previous century, yet no previous entry had been made on the subject.”

The C of E database, see Appendix 4, gives two conflicting dates for Samuel’s death. The record for Maidford parish says that Samuel died on 05/05/1768 and was succeeded as rector by Gilbert Mabbot. However, the record for Plumpton says that Samuel died on 15/12/1767 and was succeeded as rector by James Eyre(s). Unfortunately the database does not have the dates that Samuel was appointed as rector to the two parishes.

The link between the Bowerman and West families is that John West (baptized 25/12/1616, in Banbury) married a Mary Boreman on 27/4/1636 in Banbury, daughter of John and Katheren (KA – sic) Bowerman. Mary’s baptism date in Banbury is 13/9/1613.

John West who married Joyce Hawtayn was the son of John and Mary (née Bowerman) West. He was Mayor of Banbury 1687-8, and 1699-1700.

From entries in the “Oxford – Banbury – Baptism and Burial Register, 1653 – 1723”, see Appendix 7, I believe Samuel’s father (James) and grandfather (John) to have been glaziers in Banbury. Samuel had at least 3 other siblings – John who was born in 1712 and died 1713, Joyce who was born in 1713, and Elizabeth who was born in 1714/5 and died in 1716.

The burials of Joyce Hawtayn and John West, Samuel’s paternal grandparents, took place in 1716/7 and 1721/2 respectively.

(Note that in some records, the year for a date from 1st January to 24th March inclusive is shown as old year / new year. This is because prior to 1752 in England, the year began on 25 March (Lady Day). So the day after 31 December 1743 was 1 January 1743, and the day after 24th March 1743 was 25th March 1744. The Calendar Act of 1751 changed this, so that the day after 31 December 1751 was 1 January 1752. As a consequence, 1751 was a short year - it ran only from 25 March to 31 December.)

The following table shows the 5 generations to Rev. Samuel West.

- 1 John West m Margaret
- 2 John West (1616 – 1666) m 27 Apr 1636, Banbury, Mary Bowerman (1613 -)
- 3 John West (1645 – 1721/2) m 19 Jun 1670, Banbury, Joyce Hawtayn (- 1716/7)
- 4 James West (1683 -) m Mary
- 5 Samuel West (1717 -) m Sarah

This shows that our Samuel West in the bible, was the great-grandson of the Mary Bowerman from the first inscription. Why the birth of Samuel's grandfather John is not mentioned in the bible we will never know – since Samuel's great grandmother and parents are mentioned, it seems strange that the birth of his rather illustrious paternal grandfather, who was twice mayor of Banbury, was not. It's one of those mysteries in family history we will never probably never solve, although his grandfather being born in the thick of the English Civil War may have some bearing. John was born in 1645, and on June 14th of that year the Parliamentarians broke their siege on Oxford and forced the Royalists into battle at Naseby, in Northamptonshire (only about 25 miles from Banbury). This was the decisive battle in which the Royalists effectively lost the war, they would have been dangerous times with families torn apart and much social upheaval.

Miscellaneous Inscriptions, Candle Grease And An Expert Opinion

I then went through the entire bible page by page, wondering what else I had missed! I found some more writing in the margins of various pages. These are not family inscriptions but appear to be religious texts. According to the expert opinion these are in "an old hand" which means they are contemporary with the 17th and 18th century family inscriptions.

Photos of these miscellaneous inscriptions are on the internet, see Appendix 9.

There are lots of splodges of candle grease scattered throughout the bible, and one can easily imagine the rector poring over the bible late at night, in the flickering light of a candle, in the draughty old country parsonage !

It just so happens there is an international book auction firm, Dominic Winter, who are based in a village close to me. I took the bible to their expert in this field, Colin Meays, as it seemed too good an opportunity to miss. I told him it wasn't for sale, but he was still kind enough to spend quite a bit of time with me and told me lots of things about it :

1. The bible is a known edition called the "Herbert 290". This means that in the 1968 version of the "Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of The English Bible 1525 - 1961" (which is apparently *the* reference catalogue for old bibles) by A. S. Herbert MA BD, it is item number 290.
2. It is a "Geneva" bible which was the English language version which preceded the King James bible of 1611. It can be recognized by the misprint of "Bakker" for "Barker" on the front page where it says it was printed by Robert Barker of London, who was the king's own printer.
3. The book has been rebound in calfskin in the early 19th century. I suspect this was when the Jones family obtained it, and started putting down their children starting with Pryce in 1823. Unfortunately, the pages have been trimmed for this rebinding, and sometimes the writing at the top of the page has been trimmed off. Also, the book was not rebound in the same order as the original, which is why Genesis was not at the beginning as usual.
4. Colin is very impressed that the front page with the date and printer still exists, apparently in a lot of old bibles it's missing.
5. There is some of the bible missing from the end where there is a section of prayers.

There is some handwriting on the spine of the bible which says "Holy Bible" and then "Bleckf.." or "Blackf..", unfortunately it has been torn off before the end of the word. I'm cannot make out this word. It's not "Blakesley" which would have fitted in nicely with the Maidford and Plumpton area, nor is it Colin's suggestion of "Blackletter" which is the kind of font the bible was printed in. There is a slight gap after the "Black" or "Bleck", so it may actually be two words.

The Garner Family

My friend's father was Brian Garner who had lived in Olney in Northamptonshire, not far from Plumpton, Maidford and Helmdon. Brian's father and grandfather had run the Garners' draper shop at 21 Market Place, Olney.

My best lead as to how the bible came into the possession of the Garner family is that Joseph Garner (Brian's grandfather) was a "local preacher" in the 1891 census. I understand from Audrey Forgham that the old rectory was replaced by a new building in the second half of the 19th century. So perhaps the effects from the old Helmdon rectory were sold off when the new one was built, and Joseph bought the bible.

Brian's younger brother is still alive, although very old and not very well, so it might be possible to ask him if he knows why the bible was in his family. I have scoured the Garner family tree, the online censuses and Catherine Pritchard's documentation, and I can't see any connection between them and the Jones family of Helmdon Parsonage.

Helmdon Parsonage

The 19th century Jones inscriptions definitely say "Helmdon Parsonage", but I am not absolutely sure if this is the same place as the existing building in which the vicar lived and which was known within living memory as "Helmdon Rectory".

This existing red brick building, which became a private house in 1990, replaced the old thatched rectory which was pulled down in the second half of the 19th century. The wash paintings of the older thatched building, which may have dated from the early sixteenth century, are called paintings of the rectory.

However, the fact that the house was called the vicarage or rectory in later years, doesn't mean that it wasn't referred to as the parsonage in the 19th century.

Audrey Forgham has asked around Helmdon, and she is almost certain there wasn't a building which was separate parsonage from the rectory. Certainly there is no house standing which might have been one, although it might have been pulled down when new houses were put near the church.

I have had a quick look at "Barchester Towers" to see what terms a contemporary author of the mid 19th century, famous for writing about clergymen, would have used for their homes. In this novel Anthony Trollope seems to have used the various terms reasonably interchangeably. For example, the house at Plumstead where Archdeacon Grantly lived, is called at various times in the book "parsonage" (chapter 13), "vicarage" (chapter 21) and "rectory" (chapter 21).

I am therefore fairly certain that the Helmdon Parsonage of the 19th century inscriptions is the earlier thatched Helmdon Rectory of the paintings, which stood on the site of later Victorian replacement.

The local history magazine "Aspects of Helmdon" show the paintings of the old thatched rectory. Details of the magazine can be found in Appendix 3.

Unanswered Questions

As with all historical research, my investigation into the bible's past have raised as many questions as it has answered !

I would be grateful for any additional information which readers of this article could supply. My contact details are on the front page of this article.

In particular I am looking to find out the following :

- Why is there an inscription in the bible written in 1753 by, or about, Sarah West ? What is the significance of this date ? From the notes in the "History of Plumpton" it may be the date Samuel was appointed rector of Maidford and Plumpton. Perhaps it may also have been the year Samuel and Sarah were married.
- How did the bible get from the family of Samuel West, rector of Plumpton and Maidford in 1753, to the family of Pryce Jones, curate at Helmdon Parsonage (about 5 miles from Maidford, and 2 miles from Plumpton) by 1823 ?

I have three possible theories, and the Edmunds family feature in two of them. (A large branch of the Edmunds family came from Plumpton and were associated with the church as churchwardens. Also Richard Edmunds, born in 1793 in Plumpton, had moved to Banbury by 1820, so maybe there is a connection between the Wests and the Edmunds in Banbury.)

My theories about how the bible came to the Jones family in Helmdon are :

1. It came from Plumpton with Mary-Ann Edmunds, who was the Helmdon curate's wife in the 19th century inscription.
 2. It came from Maidford via Sarah Green. She was the grandmother of Pryce Jones the curate of Helmdon, and married Rev Samuel Jemson in Maidford in 1758.
 3. It came from Plumpton with Mary-Ann Edmunds' aunt, Harriet Edmunds. Harriet was married to Rev John Russell who was the Rector of Helmdon from about 1783. However there are no Russell inscriptions in the bible.
- How did the bible get from the Jones family of Helmdon Parsonage, last inscription being 1845, to the Garner family in Olney (about 22 miles from Helmdon) ?
 - What is the word "Bleckf.." or "Blackf..", or words "Bleck f.." or "Black f.." on the damaged spine ?

Appendix – Acknowledgements, Sources and Internet Links

1. Catherine Pritchard has done a great deal of family research, including the Edmunds and Jones families mentioned in the bible inscriptions. She has found out the subsequent fates of all the children from the 19th century bible inscriptions.

The Edmunds information can be found on her own website by following the “Edmunds Family Page” link at <http://www.mypritchardfamily.co.uk/>

2. Rob Butler of Melbourne, who is a direct descendent of Pryce Jones, the eldest son in the 19th century inscription, has visited the UK in August 2010. Rob principally came to research the Welsh origins of his Jones family, but made a detour to visit my house and see the bible.

(Pryce Jones was a surgeon who emigrated to Australia, and died in the Ballarat goldfields in 1879).

3. Audrey Forgham of the Helmdon Village Website, who has given me much enthusiastic encouragement in my research into the history of the bible. Helmdon Village Website is excellent and won “Village Website of the Year 2003” for Central England. It can be found at <http://www.helmdon.com>
You can see a photo of the bible frontispiece by following “History Resources”, “Articles”, and then number “052”.
Details of the contents of the local history magazine “Aspects of Helmdon”, and where to obtain it, can be obtained by following “History Resources”, and then “Publications”.

4. There is a Church of England database which can be used to see the incumbents of the various parishes mentioned in the article. Chose Peterborough as the Jurisdiction, and then select the required Parish from the drop down list.

<http://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk/jsp/locations/index.jsp>

5. The link between the Bowerman and West families can be found on the following website :

<http://boydhouse.com/alice/Southam/southam26westancestors.html>

6. “Notes on a History of Plumpton” is a typewritten book of 72 pages written by L.W.Wilsden who was resident in Plumpton for a few years. Inside the cover are rudimentary family trees of the Aris and Edmunds families and a history of Plumpton from Domesday to 1900.

7. The Banbury section of the Oxford Baptism and Burial Registers are on the internet and can be accessed from www.ancestry.co.uk
The one in which I found the West family entries for the 17th and 18th centuries was :
 “Book : Delivered into Court 2nd May, 11 Charles I.
 Collection : Oxford – Banbury – Baptism and Burial Register, 1653 – 1723”
(Charles I was executed on the 30th January 1649, so I’m not sure why a book which covers 1653 – 1723 would have had his name on it.)

8. A list of the graduates from Oxford university, “Oxford University Alumni, 1500-1886”, is on the internet and can be accessed from www.ancestry.co.uk

9. The photos of the 17th and 18 century inscriptions, plus various other inscriptions scattered about the bible are on the internet at
: <http://photos.orange.co.uk/album/459296203>