

The Great Raid of 1670

on certain London Churches under the new
Conventicle Act.

THE Conventicle Act of 1670 endured till 1812, and has therefore been of great importance. There was precedent for it in the Elizabethan Act of 1593, which could be enforced in the last resort by banishment or death; but even Archbishop Sheldon found that public opinion would not tolerate a man being executed just because he would preach; and Bunyan was only (!) kept in prison for twelve years. An Act was passed in 1664 which substituted a fine of £100 or transportation for seven years. Even this was too strong meat. Indeed, while general opinion was against convictions, most angry passions were stirred, especially in naval circles. The ship-builders at Chatham threatened a strike if any attempt to enforce the Act were made there. It is often supposed that indignant sailors piloted the Dutch fleet into the Medway, where they burned many ships and towed away more. When the Act ran out in 1668 there was general relief in all dissenting circles.

The bishops, however, could not reconcile themselves to the speedy erection of new buildings and the wholesale appearance of preachers. Sheldon obtained reports from every parish in his province, and persuaded Parliament to pass a permanent Act, to come into force on May 10th, 1670.

Under the new Act, penalties differed from those of the temporary 1664 Act, or that of Elizabeth. A first offence entailed fines only: 5/- per hearer, £20 per preacher, £20 per owner of premises. There was no power to arrest, except for trial, and on conviction and payment of the fine the offender was freed. There was no power to imprison, as had previously been the case. Yet, as the State Papers and other records show, men did stay in prison, the process was probably either that they refused to pay and were detained for debt; or that they refused to abstain and were somewhat illegally detained; or that they were excommunicated. There were many strings to a persecutor's bow, though the informer wanted only his one-third of the fines.

Now Sheldon believed in striking while the iron was hot. In 1662 most careful arrangements had been made to fill every London pulpit the next Sunday after the wholesale resignations. This time it was decided to have spectacular raids made on the most famous of the new conventicles, at the first opportunity after May 10th. We are fortunate in having one of the informa-

tions, which appears to have been laid before the Lord Mayor. It runs as follows :

“ Mr. Vincent in hand alley Bishopsgate street Mr. Watson
The Quakers Devonshire house The Anabaptists Dunning
ally The Anabaptists in Petty france near Bethlem
The Quakers in Gracechurch street Mr. Dolittle in
Monkwell Street Cock pitt in Aldersgate street Salisbury
Court a publick Meeting in Blackfriars a publick
Meeting in Swan ally Coleman street Glovers Hall in Beech
lane.”

To execute an ordinary Act, the parish constable was the usual person, though in London the Lord Mayor had special officers also. But this Act had a clause that the militia might be employed, or any other of His Majesty's forces, horse or foot; and that any J.P. or alderman of London might call for any assistance he liked.

This particular information was placed in the hands of Sir Andrew King, colonel of the Green Regiment of the trainbands. He endorsed it with notes of the arrangements to be made. And when the officers reported back to him the results, further notes were made on the back. These are rather illegible and rather mystifying. Even where the words are clear, the meaning is not. The various notes seem to run as follows :

“ Major Wallis wth his Compy to march without Bush-gate & carry his orders — Capn Hary to march out Cripelgate & carry yt order — Sargt Turner with 10 files of ft Tho Bludwork to salsbery court and Blackfryers with a warrt—10 files of L.C. Rowswet to Bl.fryers to deliver (?) etc. ye warrante—
6 files for caldin]aly of captain bratle—[next page] Maj : Wallis [illegible] his sarj. to advise had made Procl. & yt they continue—I ordered him to exec.^{te} ye war.
[next line] hee came & said hee was to assist,
ye C: Po: [sic] I ordered him to aprhnd said minister & sume others./6 files of Capt Bratleys ordered to ye quakers meeting in Gracious street.”

This single sheet, together with 45 other papers relating to the Green Regiment, passed to the Executor of Sir Andrew. He was also chapter clerk of Westminster Abbey, where all these military papers thus found an unexpected home. This sheet is numbered 11461 in the Abbey muniments. Our attention was drawn to it by Mr. Wilfred S. Samuel. It may be the text for many comments: first, on the conventicles conducted by ministers.

Thomas Vincent, educated at Westminster, Felsted, Christ Church, was appointed rector of St. Mary Magdalen, Milk Street, in 1657. The vestry voted him £50 "in case he leaves the parish," on August 21st, 1662; for he would not conform. During the plague he won wider fame by his courageous ministry. In 1668 the Conventicle Act expired, and his friends built a special room with galleries, in Hand Alley, Bishopsgate Street, as was reported next year to the bishop. On May 25th he was fined £20 for preaching, first offence. This fixes the date of our document very closely.

Thomas Watson, educated at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, had been very important in the Presbyterian organisation of London, scribe of two Classes, assessor of the London Provincial Assembly, commissioner for approbation of ministers. He therefore resigned in 1662, but took the Oxford Oath to bow to the new order, so that he had no need to remove five miles from London. In 1669 he hired part of Devonshire House from the countess, and fitted it with two galleries, and pews. The Bishop of Lincoln in a letter of April 25th, 1670, refers to this "conventicle in Fisher's Folly," and the letter may have prompted the information being laid.

Of the Quakers in another part of Devonshire House, very much is known and has been published; so also in Gracechurch Street.

Thomas Doolittle, of Kidderminster and Pembroke College, Cambridge, was elected rector by the parishioners of St. Alphage, London Wall, in 1653; they built him a house, and laid on the New River water with a leaden pipe and a brass cock. On ejection, he and Vincent conducted worship in his house in Bunhill, and he took pupils, one of whom secured an Edinburgh M.A. in July 1664. At the plague he went to Romford, where he was presented as likely to become chargeable to the parish. By 1669 he was back in the parish of St. Giles, Cripplegate, preaching in a house built on purpose in Mugwell Street. This attempt to arrest him in May failed. His adventures have been fully recorded, and his success as a tutor was great.

We may now study the Baptist places concerned in this first raid of May 1670; the information rather corrects previous ideas as to this district.

Dunning's Alley was occupied by General Baptists, headed by John Griffith, a leader, from 1654. Despite his voluntary offer of civil obedience, he was repeatedly arrested; in 1665 in jail at Aylesbury, along with Keach and Jennings, in whom Colonel Blood was afterwards interested to secure their liberation. In 1672 he was in the King's Bench prison, and that may be the result of this raid; a general pardon freed him.

Petty France, near the Bethlehem hospital, was the site of a meeting-house provided by Edward Harrison from Kensworth. He had been helped by another ex-clergyman, Benjamin Cox, and by Samuel Tull, but Cox seems to have died. In 1669 Harrison had been indicted for holding a conventicle, but the 1664 Act had expired, and no one seems to have pressed the 1593 Act, under which Bunyan was still being held. So nothing seems to have resulted. Here again he persisted, and in 1672 he secured a licence for this house.

The meeting-house in Swan Alley is well known as the headquarters of Henry Jessey till his death in jail, 1663. He was buried in the graveyard of Bethlehem. At this time there was trouble as to a successor; a letter of July 21st, 1669 to Broadmead opened a correspondence showing that they wanted another ex-clergyman, Thomas Hardcastle. As he had joined here before June, and was imprisoned six months this year for preaching in London, it is highly probable he was arrested here on this raid. Two years later he was living at Bitton, in Gloucestershire, where he took out a general licence for Presbyterian teaching. This Church asked for no licence in 1672, secured Henry Fitten as pastor two years afterwards. When Henry Forty went to Abington, and Buttall to Plymouth in 1682, this Church disbanded, after a very chequered existence since 1616.

Glovers' Hall on Beech Lane had been the private chapel of the Abbots of Romsey, in their town-house. It was hired by a Church which had been very famous. Its heads in 1649, Thomas Gunn and Thomas Mabbatt, had signed the first Baptist Confession which attracted attention. Five years later it was the leading Church, with such important members as Edward Cressett, soon to be Master of Charterhouse and a Tryer for all England, also John Vernon, soon to be general in Ireland. It was to this Church that Myles came from Swansea and received guidance for his work in Wales; he found them housed at the Glass House on Broad Street, which they had fitted for worship with two banks of galleries. They were turned out in 1660, and returned to Glovers' Hall. Accounts were published, and reprinted by Thomas Crosby, of how they were repeatedly molested there by the soldiery in 1662. This episode shows them staunch, and links with the story of another raid in 1683, which does seem decisive, for there is no trace in 1689.

A most remarkable omission is that of Kiffin. His Church was so important that, in February, 1669, Hanserd Knollys, Edward Harrison and Kiffin had ordained Daniel Dike, an ex-clergyman, to take charge of two hundred people meeting in Finsbury Court by the Artillery ground. Dike had been indicted at Hicks Hall, and again seems to have proved there was no

longer any Law to forbid. Now, however, there was an explicit Law, yet when these instructions were given, for this very district, nothing is said as to Kiffin or Dike or the Court. This may be due to the fact that Kiffin had been recently captain in these very trainbands.

Norcott's Church in Wapping was probably being raided from the Tower. Hobson's had been in Bishopsgate and is not mentioned here, so apparently this had collapsed. Knollys' Church in Wapping, and Loveday's in Tower Hill, would again receive attentions from the Tower, as also the Seventh Day Church in Whitechapel.

It is strange that there is no warrant to deal with the Church formerly on Gun Alley, Little Moorfields, presently to worship at Paul's Alley, Barbican. Conceivably it was in 1670 at the Cockpit in Aldersgate Street, which hitherto has not been mentioned as the meeting-place of a conventicle.

Salisbury Court in Fleet Street had a meeting-house, appropriated for parish worship after the fire. This warrant shows it had been used again by nonconformists; there is no reason to connect it with Baptists. The Blackfriars meeting is not identified; it also is improbably Baptist.

W. T. WHITLEY.

A Book of Personal Religion, edited by Nathaniel Micklem.
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It is doubtful if we who are Free Churchmen appreciate the wealth and range of our spiritual tradition and inheritance. Our fathers had a firm grasp upon the Gospel; they built upon the Rock; their beliefs were held with passion; the roots of their faith went deep. The Principal of Mansfield College realises that we cannot go back to their theologies, but he feels that we must at all costs get back to their religion. So he has browsed among the authors and writings upon which, next to the Bible, our fathers nourished their spiritual life, and in this book he gives extracts from Bunyan, Calvin, John Owen and others. As we read and ponder Doddridge's *Rules for Prayer* and his thoughts on *Spiritual Dryness*, we realise that these men possessed a spiritual experience whose message is timeless. The book is timely for this day of crisis when the Church is increasingly thrown back upon the central verities.