

## RICHARD GAY OF HAYCOMBE

### An exploration of a story and its influence on local Baptist family and community history<sup>1</sup>

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

A recent acquisition by the Angus Library is a late seventeenth-century sermon attributed to Richard Gay of Haycombe.<sup>2</sup> The sixteen and a half pages of small, closely written notes are almost illegible, often written in shorthand, but contain many references to Biblical texts and other recognizable phrases.<sup>3</sup> Indeed it would appear that the manuscript consists of notes of a number of sermons. There then follow two half pages of biographical notes about Richard Gay:

The above writing was Mr Richard Gays of Haycombe in Sommerset - my great Grandfather. He was imprisoned In Ilchester Castle the same time as Mr Bunyan was

Mr Bunyan greatly respected him & dedicated a Book of his to Mr Gay -

My Great Grandfather was a Baptist minister preach'd at Haycombe in a house of his own set apart for the publick worship of God built on his own Estate he lived in ye troublesome times I think by what I can gather from History & family circumstances in or before ye time of Charles ye 2nd -

He & his hearers were much persecuted for Religion He paid ye fine for Himself & hearers as long as they would take any money they then refused to take money any longer said they would have his person accordingly & they had him to Ilchester Castle where they confined Him for three years. His wife a pious woman was left with several young children under her care but she also trusted in God & was preserved. After ye Expiration of three years he was set at liberty & returned to his family He lived to be one hundred years old & used to recount the great goodness of God to him during his imprisonment with tears of Gratitude running down his cheeks

one text I remember hearing my dear & fond mother mention was In Isaiah 43: 1 & 2 But now thus saith ye Lord that created thee, O Israel, Fear not for I have redeemed thee, I have called the by thy name: thou art mine. 2 when thou passeth thro' ye Waters I will be with thee & when through the Rivers they shall not overflow thee when thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burned neither shall the flame kindle upon thee, For I am ye Lord &c.

When my good venerable ancestor wrote this sermon he little thought a descendent of his family shd write in ye same book so long after as ye year 1802

Jane Blatch<sup>4</sup>

This is the earliest - and least complicated - dated account of the story of Richard Gay: a story which belongs to both the Gay family's descendants and to the Baptist community with which he was associated; a story which had been primarily oral; and a story which has been influential for many who have known it, who have

interpreted it, and who re-tell it.

Published local Baptist church histories tell us something of Richard Gay's story, and family descendants have kept his story alive for over three centuries;<sup>5</sup> whilst the historian, Joseph Ivimey, confidently asserted in his *A History of the English Baptists* that 'We know nothing of Richard Gay, of Bath-Haycombe'.<sup>6</sup> The present study explores the story of Richard Gay and the ways in which it has been told, taking seriously local and family traditions, and reflects upon its subsequent influence on the churches and families to whom the story belongs - a story which Marjorie Reeves, a descendant of Richard Gay, suggests 'must, in part at least, be legendary'.<sup>7</sup>

## 2 THE STORYTELLERS

The route by which it has travelled is as interesting as the story itself. It seems that for nearly a century the story was passed on orally, as the later written accounts share a similar structure and form but with variations that suggest differences in memory and interpretation. This is true of both the local church and family versions.

The earliest dated account appears to be by Jane Blatch (b.1753), written at the end of 1802. She was dependent upon her mother, Anna Attwater (née Gay, 1710-1784) for memories of her grandfather. The great-granddaughter wrote of that which 'I remember hearing my dear & fond mother mention' and referred to Richard Gay as her 'good venerable ancestor'. Other family traditions appear to have been committed to paper at about the same time, or a little later. One anonymous version in a spidery, almost illegible hand sets the story of Richard Gay within the wider context of other branches of the Gay family in the vicinity of Bath in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the stories passed down about them, but it is unfortunately the most difficult to decipher and understand. Describing the extent of the Gay family property at Haycombe, the writer refers to

the [large] pile of Building composed out of houses and where ye meeting was kept wch had a [large] Chimney & fire place where stood up a high settle where our family used to sit. It must be the good Minister Richard Gay that built the House for that was built in 1665 who was so cruelly persecuted.

This story comes directly from recent ancestral memory. Earlier the account talks about life at Haycombe and a certain clock which 'as my Granmama Mrs Jane Gay was drawing up ye clock it fell down on her head'. Clearly this incident sets the source within the generation of Gay Thomas Attwater (1736-1792), who may be its originator, though it might originate in another branch of the family, for the clock is introduced to make another point entirely. The narrative begins talking about John Gay of Southstoke who had at least two sons. One, a clothier at Batheaston, was famed for his tirelessness, having walked from London to Batheaston within twenty-four hours. At this time 'clocks & watches were a very scarce article but he gained a clock by his hand' and it was to 'our Gays shame as he left his fortune to the Gays formerly at Haycomb he also left his clock wch was fixed on a pedestal

in Haycomb kitchen'. Another son is supposed to have been married and farmed in Bath until his father's death when he moved north, only returning home when old and in failing health. Missing his Haycombe relatives, he

sent his Servant over to beg them to make no delay but come & see him but he being a batchellor & my Granmama a widow & my mama & aunt young women over [illegible] delicacy & save nessary suspision caused them to delay their visit too long - wch he took as disrespect &c therefore as he found his life drawing a pace to its close he made his will in favour of ye Corporation, his Grandfather John Gay being Mayor about ye year 1500 & his own Father & Himself tho long absent from Bath was held as one of that Corporation so being disgusted at what he thought a slight from His Cousins He left His Estates at & near Bath for ye Corporation of Bath on part of which The Circuts Gay Street Walks houses & all & all the streets that leads to ye Circutts are built on also a field that joins the Garden orchard & [lawn] close at Haycomb called Town Leaze with several other fields joining Haycomb Estate that no doubt He intended for his relatives had they not been over nice wch He reported when too late.

In 1820 Philip Whitaker (1766-1847) of Bratton in Wiltshire, another descendent, copied out an elaborate, annotated family tree attributed to Gay Thomas Attwater his 'late uncle'; this is clearly the product of local memory and tradition. The bulk of the narrative is missing from the annotations, so we merely learn that 'Mr John Gay Mayor of Bath left Haycombe Estate to Mr Richard Gay his nephew ... The above Mr J Gay left a Piece of Ground call'd town lease to the Chamber of Bath, worth 200 pounds'; and again, 'Mr Jno Gay about the year of our Lord 1500 was Mayor of Bath he left Haycombe Estate to Mr Richd Gay Minister of the Gosple'. These details demonstrate a link between this tree and the earlier account that originated either from Gay Thomas Attwater or another of his generation.

Another branch of the family survived at Bradford-on-Avon among either the Head family or descendants of David Wassell (1808-1873), minister of the Somerset Street Baptist congregation in Bath who had married Sarah Attwater, a descendant of Richard Gay. David Wassell-Smith transcribed from a notebook what appear to be the recollections of a grandchild of David Wassell. The story is told in its standard form, with a few variations, including important footnote annotations indicating sources. A 'tree' is mentioned and the details show this was a version of that which Philip Whitaker copied many years earlier, including the section about John Gay, Mayor of Bath, giving land to the corporation of the city. The writer verifies that some details came direct 'from Granny via Mother', authenticating the account:

Some of John Bunyan's letters to Richard Gay were kept in a window seat box at St Margaret's Bradford-on-Avon. Unfortunately they were eaten by mice - at the time when Grandfather was ill for months before his death. Granny had 3 young children to care for as well as her husband and 'most unfortunately the house was neglected'.

Other letters between Bunyan and Gay are said to have been at Haycombe 'when

that house was burnt'. The main information which this account adds concerns the nature of the persecution suffered at Haycombe: Richard Gay was fined five pounds and his hearers fifty shillings, 'he being a man of property and they poor'; and the persecution is attributed to the Langton and Cobb families, being set upon by 'their clergyman Mr Morris'. The writer was at pains to contrast this with the correspondence between Bunyan and Gay 'wch speke much of ye goodness of God in supporting and comforting them in their confinement' and the consequences for 'their wrathful persecutors':

Mr Cobb as he was going on some vengeful course against the Dissenters was thrown from his Horse and dragged to Death. Mr Morris was seized with a most dreadful pain in his stomach and bowels & nothing seemed to relieve him but Dr Bastics [?] cordial which was then sold at Haycomb from Dr Bastic who was a dissenting Minister in Scotland but after using every method the said faculty could invest He the said Morris died a most deplorable Death the worms eating thro' His inside came out at His Navel, Mouth Nose Ears etc.

The footnotes add further to this sorry tale, again 'from Granny via Mother':

When Mr Morris was persecuting the dissenters he suffered badly from gall stones, a dissenting physician he had imprisoned was the only man who could afford him relief; when attacks came the doctor was taken from prison to attend him and imprisoned again on Mr Morris recovering.

The first serious attempt at writing the early history of Baptists in Bath is in the introductory chapters of Philip Cater's *Memoirs of the Life and Character of the Late Rev. John Paul Porter*, published in 1834. Cater, minister of the York Street Baptist congregation, charted the rise and progress of dissenting congregations in and around the city in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, citing the story of Richard Gay of Haycombe as the earliest Baptist church in the neighbourhood. He followed the same basic outline as Jane Blatch, but with three notable additions. Cater mentions that Richard Gay was an ancestor of Miss Head of Bradford on Avon, well known at the beginning of the nineteenth century as second wife of William Jay of Argyle Chapel in Bath, and daughter of George and Mariana Head of Bradford-on-Avon. Jay had preached the interment sermon of Mariana Head (née Atwater, 1742-1832) on 1 March 1832, and had mentioned that

She could trace back decided piety in her family through at least three generations. One of her ancestors was the friend of the celebrated John Bunyan. This was Mr. Richard Gay, who lived at Hay Combe, a small village near Bath, where he preached the Gospel before any Baptist Church was formed in that famous city.<sup>8</sup>

That Philip Cater and William Jay both used the information suggests that the story of Richard Gay was fairly widely known and a point of reference for the readers of the book or the hearers of the sermon. Cater went on to demonstrate that Richard Gay and Haycombe were connected with the local Bristol Association of Baptist churches by pointing to various letters to which Richard Gay's name was appended

in Ivimey's *A History of the English Baptists*. Further, Cater argued that the Haycombe congregation was associated with the Bristol rather than Bath churches after Gay's death, 'at a time when there was no dissenting place of worship in that city'. Hugh and Caleb Evans of Broadmead and Beddome and Newton of the Pithay were among those supplying Haycombe from Bristol at this time.

The second church history to refer to Richard Gay was published much later in 1906, when William Tuck wrote *Notes on the History of Argyle Chapel, Bath*. Argyle Chapel was the home of the Independent congregation to whom William Jay ministered from 1790 to 1853. As neighbouring ministers, Cater and Jay knew each other well. Tuck began his history of Argyle Chapel with an account of early Bath nonconformity in which he accepted Cater's assessment and described the Haycombe congregation under Richard Gay as not only the first Baptist but also the earliest 'Dissenting Meeting' in the vicinity of Bath. Tuck added explicitly that Miss Head of Bradford 'became Mr Jay's second wife'. His lack of interest in the specifically Baptist details of the story is apparent in abridging Cater's observations on Haycombe's links with the wider Baptist Association and the Bristol Churches, and his lack of care shows when he says that Richard Gay 'was pastor of the little church which met at Combe Hay' - Combe Hay lies south of Haycombe.

The story of Richard Gay and Haycombe next appeared in print in 1908, when R.H. Moore contributed an 'Historical Survey' to a volume on Manvers Street Baptist Church and its newly opened Institute building. The pioneering nature of Baptist witness in Bath at the beginning of the twentieth century was introduced by reference to a pioneer of the seventeenth century, Richard Gay. Moore used Cater's history but still managed one mistake and one additional comment: the reference to Ivimey erroneously became 'Irving's History of the Baptists'; and he commented on Richard Gay's supposed 'godly character'.

In the 1960s the story of the Strict Baptist churches in Bath, with their claim to be the true descendants of the Particular Baptist congregations in the city, was written by Ralph Chambers. His original manuscript was never published but survives, and was later used extensively by Robert Oliver in his book on the *Strict Baptist Chapels of the South West of England*, published in 1968. Both accounts were strongly dependent upon Cater for content and structure. An apologetic use of the story is strongly apparent: Chambers says that Richard Gay preached the 'Word of Truth' and 'founded a baptist church on strict communion lines established upon the doctrine of grace'. He adds that 'He was a gracious and godly man and a successful minister of the Gospel of Christ'. Oliver repeats this, saying that Gay 'formed a Particular Baptist church on strict communion lines'. Both accounts wrongly place Richard Gay in Combe Hay rather than Haycombe, and both state that the Mr Beddome who supplied Haycombe after Richard Gay's death was Benjamin Beddome of Bourton on the Water rather than John Beddome, minister of the Pithay Meeting in Bristol. These additions to the received story are not found elsewhere. In 1953 Manvers Street Baptist Church celebrated a delayed bi-centenary

but no history was written. Various attempts exist in manuscript form,<sup>9</sup> but it was not finally published until 1972, when they published a history by Charles Attryde and Leslie Moore. The thin pamphlet provided a summary history, concentrating on the more recent past, with some attention to the pre-history through its former existence at Somerset Street from 1768 and a consideration of Richard Gay in the seventeenth century. Moore's abbreviated account is the main source, complete with its erroneous references to 'Irving' and to Haycombe as 'presumably the village we now know as Combe Hay'. Without exception later writers relied heavily upon Philip Cater's 1834 account. The accounts agree in finding Bath's earliest Baptists in Richard Gay and the congregation at Haycombe.

Given the different versions of Richard Gay's story and the different ways the story has been told, it is worth asking whether it can still be re-told with any degree of reliability or whether there is any link between the story's lasting influence and its accuracy or truth. Fortunately, other documents bear witness to Richard Gay at Haycombe; with their assistance a fresh attempt can be made.

### 3 THE STORY RE-TOLD

Richard Gay was minister of the Baptist Church which met at Haycombe in the parish of Englishcombe near Bath towards the end of the seventeenth century. We do not know when or how the congregation was formed, but Haycombe had been associated with the Gay family since the end of the sixteenth century. In 1550 Haycombe Farm and Claysend Farm, Englishcombe, at that time one property, were sold to Richard Gay of Englishcombe and David Baber of Twerton.<sup>10</sup> The early accounts of Richard Gay refer to his uncle John Gay, Mayor of Bath about 1500, who left Haycombe to his nephew and a piece of ground to the Chamber of Bath, but 1500 is too early if Richard Gay was still alive and active towards the end of the seventeenth century. Actual records show that it was a Richard Gay who was elected Mayor of Bath for the year 1614, according to the provisions of the City's charter of Elizabeth I. Council minutes record that

... upon Mr. Richard Gay his refusal of the Office of Mairolltie of the said Cittie the said ffine of ffiftie pounds was imposed upon him by the Mayor Aldermen and Common Councill of the same Cittie or the greater part of them. And alsoe committed to the Gaole of the said Cittie according to the contents of the said Charter.

The reason for his refusal is not recorded, and despite such a display of dissent he was soon released to serve as Mayor, and re-elected during 1620, 1626 and 1632, the last time he appears as a member of the council.<sup>11</sup> In 1641 this Richard bequeathed his property in Englishcombe and other places in and around Bath, including Haycombe, to a number of family members-many of whom were named Richard or John, adding to the confusion; the connections between them all are by no means certain. Also in 1641 the city council granted to Thomas Gay two acres of ground at 'Twiverton' for the fine of five pounds. 'Twiverton', or Twerton, is

the parish between the city of Bath and 'Inglescombe', or Englishcombe to the west. The area where Englishcombe triangulates with Twerton and neighbouring Newton St Loe is known as Haycombe. Strictly, Haycombe is within the parish of Englishcombe but in the manor of Twerton.<sup>12</sup> By the middle of the seventeenth century some Haycombe land seems to have belonged to the city. The Gay story states that a former Mayor of Bath left land to his nephew and to the City of Bath, including 'Town lease', which might be the 'Cow Lease' purchased by the corporation in 1637. Jean Manco has pointed out that Barrow Farm included land at Haycombe and Haycombe Farm at Barrow. The complete picture is even more complicated as leases were taken up for land on other strips of ground at Haycombe during the century: some of the land at Haycombe was clearly held by the Gay family, whilst certain strips were owned by the City and let on short leases. On 19 April 1641 John Gay of Batheaston, clothier, was granted by the Corporation a seven-year lease at Haycombe:

one pasture ground called Haycombe, containing 9 acres, between the grounds of Mr. Richard Gay of Claverton, gent., on the East and West sides, and a ground of Peter Rosewell called the Parke on the South side, and a way leading from Bath to Wilmington on the North side.<sup>13</sup>

This lease was evidently renewed. Council Minutes, 31 March 1651, record: 'Agreed that Mr John Gay shall not hold the ground called Hawcombe but it is to be taken by the Corporation'. He still held this property in 1654 when it was 'Agreed that Mr John Gay shall be abated of the yearly rent for the ground now in his possession called Haycombe in the Parish of Englishcombe'. John Gay's lease was lost in 1655, when the land was granted to Richard Turner, who held it until at least 1679, when it was granted to a certain Robert Day. The council 'Agreed that Robt Day shall give 6 pound for Haycombe lying in Englishcombe for seven years ... Agreed that Richard Gray shall have a copy of Licence for 10s'.<sup>14</sup>

The part of the story which talks about the land on which Gay Street and the Circus stand being bequeathed to the city is an interesting puzzle. The land in question was subject to piecemeal speculative development by John Wood, the Bath architect, who needed to purchase plots of land on the Barton side of the city owned by an absentee London surgeon, Robert Gay. Wood had purchased the leases on various plots, not without some difficulty for Gay was no fool, but Wood had persuaded Gay kindly to donate more land as a free gift to build a hospital. Unscrupulous dealings caused Gay to withdraw this gift.<sup>15</sup> After Robert Gay's death in 1737, his 'dearly beloved daughter' and only heir, Margaret Garrard, continued to administer the leases for the ground around Gay Street and the vicinity.<sup>16</sup> The tradition may point to this branch of the family, although it is uncertain what the connection, if any, is with the Gay family at Haycombe.

Others named Richard Gay and John Gay, particularly in the Lyncombe and Widcombe areas of Bath, complicate the picture. A Richard Gay of Westgate Street was married in 1611 to Anna Chapman the daughter of John Chapman, shoemaker,

and in 1632 assigned his house to John Biggs for the fine of ten shillings.<sup>17</sup> A Richard Gay of Widcombe was fined £180 for delinquency, and by 1650 imprisoned for debt. John Ashe, a neighbour and chairman of the Goldsmith's Hall Committee, came to his rescue on the petition of Gay's five children: 'The petitioners ... are my near neighbours, and are in very great want; and their father to my knowledge in very great misery, by reason of his debts and imprisonment'.<sup>18</sup> The petition was successful and Lyncombe Farm was restored to the family. At least two people known as Richard Gay seem to have been living at Haycombe at the end of the century. A visit to Englishcombe Parish Church on 10 August 1818 yielded the tombstone inscription: 'In Mem. 'Richard Gay' Haycombe & Anna his 1<sup>st</sup> wife who died 1676 - also Eliz his 2<sup>nd</sup> wife who he survived only 4 months & died May 31. 1700 aged 88'.<sup>19</sup>

On 28 December 1704 a Richard Gay of Haycombe came to an agreement with Joseph Langton of Newton St Loe, who now owned Barrow Farm, over exchanging land to simplify enclosure. The Articles of Agreement are signed by Richard Gay in a weak ageing hand and witnessed by John Gay, probably the son through whom Richard Gay's story descended, and Walt Clarke, whose identity is unknown. This is probably Richard Gay the minister, son of John Gay and great-nephew to Richard Gay of Claverton, the former Mayor. The latter's will was proved by his widow Alice on 4 December 1641-2 soon after his death. This will illuminates the extent of the Gay family land-holding in Englishcombe and Newton St Loe. Richard Gay of Claverton's nephew, another Richard, was a main beneficiary.

Then whereas I have formerly made certain estates or certain parcels of land at Newton to Richd Gay, son of my brother John Gaye decd, I do hereby confirm the same, and I do give unto him the sd Richd Gaye the third part of the wood called [Varmans] Wood and all my term and estate therein to come. I give also to the sd Richard the [verdicity or halfendeale] of all my goods and household stuff at Inglecombe wh were his grandmother's and grandfather's there.<sup>20</sup>

This Richard was probably not the minister as he would have been too old still to be active at the end of the century. The will shows the concern of Richard Gay of Claverton, himself childless, to care for the children of his deceased brothers.

I give unto John Gaye, eldest son of my brother Robt Gaye decd, all my land of fine simple in Inglescombe, Newton St Lowe and Twiverton, acc: to certain assurance thereof formerly [made] unto him, in cons. whereof the sd John Gaye, with his father, became in bond to me to pay to my exors the sum of £300 within one half year after my decease, according as D and dispose thereof, which sd surety I do now dispose of as followeth: I give to my sd Kinsman John Gaye £20 to satisfy himself of such moneys as he hath laid out for me; to the same John Gaye, and to his son Richd, £10, which I desire the sd John may bestow upon some necessary employment or state which his said son Richd may enjoy and say hereafter this my old Uncle Richard's gift.

This latter Richard is more likely the Richard Gay of our story, combining as he



does the various elements of the tradition: the Mayor being his great uncle Richard Gay, his father being John Gay, and the curious legend that he shall 'say hereafter this my old Uncle Richard's gift'!

In the mid-seventeenth century Englishcombe became associated with political and religious radicals. John Gay of Englishcombe, possibly father or uncle of Richard Gay the minister, was one of the 'schismatics and sequestrators' or 'radicals and upstarts' with whom Colonel John Pyne gained control of the Somerset County Committee, in the aftermath of the civil war, from about 1646 to 1657. The role of John Gay has been brought to light by David Underdown and John Wroughton in their studies of Somerset during the civil war period. The return to government in Commonwealth Somerset was slow and traumatic, the County Committee being largely controlled by Pyne, originally Presbyterian but politically Independent and increasingly radical. At first the Presbyterians thought they would have everything their own way, controlling the pulpits of the major population centres around Bath, but they became more tolerant as Presbyterians, Independents and radicals alike mingled within the city. The London Committee of Accounts was set up during the war to monitor receipt of public money by sequestration and the like, and William Prynne appointed a local subcommittee of this central body, mainly from aldermen and gentry from the vicinity of Bath, hoping to restrict the activity of the County Committee. John Gay of Englishcombe was a member of the subcommittee, but by 1646 had been won over by Pyne and was subsequently described by William Strode as 'in favour with the committee of the county', and thus able to delay the work of the subcommittee. By 1648 a counter-revolutionary tide in the counties had fuelled Pyne's purge of Somerset JPs, and he packed juries with his supporters, described by Clement Walker as 'schismatics and sequestrators'. Pyne's control of the county had been secured by men such as John Gay of Englishcombe, such that the 'last remaining old families were disappearing from local government and being replaced by radicals and upstarts'. Yet Pyne's years of control were short, as the Protectorate under Oliver Cromwell in 1654 gradually brought the army back into line and centralised local administration, so by 1657 more moderate parliamentary gentry had replaced Gay and other Pyne supporters on the local committees.<sup>21</sup>

During this period the villages to the south and west of Bath gave rise to various kinds of vociferous dissent. John Wroughton records the Presbyterian fear that 'We have numerous Sectaries, Anabaptists, Antinomians, Seekers and I know not what; all shows our dissolution to be neere'. A visitor to Bath in September 1646 commented: 'The most remarkable thing in Towne are ye church and ye Bathes, and ye latter are ye most zealously frequented, though I think the Pulpitt to be ye hottest bathe in Towne; for it one day sweats Independency and Presbytery ye next, and that soe violently'. Wroughton argues that

Local churches, therefore, muddled on for the next five unsettled years (1648-53), numbering a great variety of Anglicans, Presbyterians, Baptists and Independents among their clergy. The continued presence of the New Model Army in the vicinity

ensured that sectarian activity continued unabated during the period 1646-1648.<sup>22</sup>

An early Quaker manuscript records 'Some of ye first yt Recd ye Truth & ye Messengers thereof', including 'Tho Goodwin, of Saltford, T Collins, of Bath, Jo Evans, of Inksbach'.<sup>23</sup> Inglesbatch is a small village on the south-western end of Englishcombe parish. The manuscript continues:

Several of these & some others not only Recd ye Truth but pt of ye Ministry as follows ...

Tho Murford, of Inksbatch, also had pt of ye ministry, & sufferd Imprisonmt at Bath, in 1656, but Lost his Condition, and Lived at Norwich in his Latter dayes ...

... To whom I may add Kath Evans (wife of Jo. Evans, of Inksbatch), who Travelled & suffered much wth S Cheevers, in ye Isle of Malta, 3 years & half, from 1659 to 1662, & dyed at home very Ancient in 1692.

In the case of Thomas Murford, who had caused disturbance in Bath Abbey and was subsequently beaten up by the congregation and imprisoned,<sup>24</sup> George Fox himself intervened by letter to the 'Magistrates & Teachers of Bathe' for mercy towards one whom 'you have kept allmost two yeares from his wife & Children'.<sup>25</sup> Quakers were indeed treated harshly by the authorities. Katharine Evans of Englishcombe travelled widely, suffering persecution wherever she went,<sup>26</sup> and reached Malta with Sarah Cheevers before being caught by the Inquisition. George Fox was instrumental in their eventual release in 1662.<sup>27</sup> Numbers of Quakers from around Bath languished in Ilchester Gaol for preaching without licence and refusing to swear the oath of allegiance during the reigns of Charles II and James II.<sup>28</sup>

Francis Bampffield, the educated Sabbatarian Baptist minister whose brother Thomas lived outside Bath, spent eight years in Dorchester Gaol. The editor of the later published version of the account, which had originated in Bampffield's hand but was subsequently copied by Joseph Stennet, offers this peculiar commentary:

Thomas Bampffield had been Recorder of Exeter, member of the Commonwealth Parliament, Speaker of Richard Cromwell's Parliament. He lived at Dunkerton near Bath, & about 1663 blossomed out in extraordinary costume considering himself commissioned to found a new sect. Francis won him to Seventh-Day Baptist principles, & he subsided into quieter life.<sup>29</sup>

Bath as a spa centre had for many years been a melting pot of radical political, religious and social intercourse.<sup>30</sup> These few examples illustrate the context of political and religious ferment into which fits the Baptist congregation around Richard Gay at Haycombe. Local Quakers had a list made in 1659 of Somerset men considered moderate in their dealings with Friends, including 'Richard Gay of Inglscombe' and 'John Gay of Batheaston'.<sup>31</sup> John Wroughton has argued that

Nonetheless, although there was at least one member of the council who was a Baptist [i.e. William Russell, who refused to swear the oath of allegiance in 1662 after the Restoration], there is no evidence that the Baptist movement took root in

the city - nor that the formation of the Baptist Western Association in the 1650s had the same sort of impact locally as it did in Wells, Taunton and Bridgwater.<sup>32</sup>

There may not have been a congregation of Baptists within the city walls but Baptists were worshipping within very close proximity at Haycombe, and they would almost certainly have had close contact with Bath. We do not know when or how the congregation at Haycombe first started, although elsewhere such congregations were often the product of army occupation or the work of travelling preachers such as Thomas Collier.<sup>33</sup> In 1652 Collier was arguing that amongst Baptists it was customary that all who had the gift of preaching had the freedom to preach:

those varieties of stations amongst men, must have variety of distinct Callings to it; but this of Preaching and Propheying is that which all the brethren that have the gifts are called to, as I have often proved; that in the Church all may prophesy, that have the gift, and yet no confusion, but peace and order: and indeed its nothing else but ignorance, and your pride, in being afraid of such an equality with your Brethren, as the Scripture presents you with.<sup>34</sup>

By 1669 the Baptist congregation at Haycombe had experienced some success, for Episcopal Returns of that year show a conventicle of fifty people gathered 'At the house of Richard Gay' in Englishcombe with Richard Gay as their teacher or preacher: although not specified we can be confident that Haycombe was the location.<sup>35</sup> A congregation of fifty was significant at this time of persecution although bigger conventicles of Presbyterians, numbering one or even three hundred, were recorded as meeting in houses, barns and inns in and around Bath. John Wroughton also ignores the evidence of Haycombe's active participation in Baptist Western Association life from very soon after records were again kept.<sup>36</sup>

In 1677 Richard Gay was present as one of the two Western Association Messengers at Southwick at what can only be described as the trial of Thomas Collier by fellow Baptists for things written in *An Additional Word to the Body of Divinity*.<sup>37</sup> By then Collier was minister at Southwick, and London Baptists sent a delegation headed by William Kiffin and Nehemiah Coxe to dispute with him concerning changes in his views. Collier had always been a controversial figure amongst Particular Baptists, as preacher and founder of churches throughout the south-west of England, challenging their Calvinist doctrines of Election and Particular Redemption, and increasingly veering towards Arminius. *A Confession of Faith of Several Churches of Christ In the County of Somerset, and of some Churches in the Counties neer adjacent*, published in 1656 and due in large part to Collier's efforts, had been a notable attempt to unite General and Particular Baptists on one hand and to delineate Baptist doctrines against the errors of the Quakers on the other.<sup>38</sup> However by 1677 events had reached a climax, as Nehemiah Coxe makes clear:

... it hath either been answered many times already by those that have written against the Pelagians, Jesuites, and Socinians, in whose steps Mr. Collier very

frequently treads; or else (where he doth transcend the Heresies of those mentioned) its weakness and impiety is more manifest than to need any refutation by another; yet on many accounts, some Answer to him was judged necessary, not only by my self, but by divers others ...<sup>39</sup>

The heresy charges against Collier were a matter of discipline for the London church of William Kiffin, who still considered Collier a member although he maintained that he had not been communicant for over twenty years, had long been a member at Wells, and was now at Southwick. The Southwick church backed him, for if they let the London church have its way they would 'cease to be a Church of Christ'. Walter Penn urged that the Southwick church submit to the Messengers of the London and Western churches to decide; as Collier later recorded:

... yet still he persisted to get the power of determining into their own hands, and Richard Gay, one of them, to declare that they were of one mind in the matter, spake to the same effect; but when they could no further prevail, but for advice only, they yielded then to proceed, using their own power of determining, though denied then by the Church ...<sup>40</sup>

The churches' decision that Thomas Collier was a heretic and should no longer be in association with them was conveyed in a letter written and signed on 2 August 1677,<sup>41</sup> by Messengers, including Richard Gay, gathered for the ordination of Andrew Gifford on 3 August 1677.<sup>42</sup>

The 1670s and 1680s were especially difficult for the Haycombe Baptists. Among Andrew Gifford's papers is a late letter of this period from the Haycombe church to a local Assembly of Baptist Churches,<sup>43</sup> called 'to take Account of their present state, that our breaches may be repaired, our disorders rectified, our wants supplied'. Although the picture at Haycombe is not good, the people remain hopeful:

A time to repair our Spiritual decayes, is earnestly expected, we had once a time to flourish and increase as others doe at this day, but are now (partly) by death, and alsoe by the removall of many of our members to a distance from us, come to a small number, and they for the most part soe poor that we are not without great hardship, able to subsist as a church In so much that tho we retain the name of a church, yet we cannot perform the duty of a church (with other churches) on publick occasions, to our trouble and sorrow ... the Lord deales very graciously with us, not only, that our candlestick doe still retaine its place, but doe also manifest A continued disposition to doe our soules good, yet we cannot, we doe not returne unto him according to his favours freely bestowed on us, which is a burden (almost) too heavy for us to bear ...

The letter continues by outlining the three things that troubled the Haycombe church at this time, namely that 'we sit under such occasions of feare and sorrow, partly from the uncertainty of our nationall state and partly from the high and abominable provocations of our female sex, who doe dare the Almighty, to poure out his judgments upon us'. Firstly, like many dissenting congregations who had undergone

periods of persecution, Haycombe Baptists feared the consequences of any settlement of the monarchy and constitution. Secondly, the issue of the propriety of congregational singing had raised its head here, as elsewhere, and there was great concern about a group of the women who

contend for a course of singing, not only amongst themselves, But with such who (tis to be feard) doe rather sing, from the want of grace, than from the abundance of their hearts, if there be a time, for every purpose, then surely singing is not unseasonable ...

Thirdly, the issue of education in the church had surfaced and caused controversy as in other churches:

moreover, our jealousy touching the overweening Respect some of our dear brethren have manifested towards human learning, will not let us be wholly silent, when we consider how great things God has wrought, without it, in this our day, and how much the blessed learnings of the Spirit of Christ, according to prophesy and promise, in former times, and great experience in the present day ...

The letter commended Richard Gay and William Lypeat as Messengers to the Assembly, and was signed by Nathaniel Britton, John Bletchly, John Salmon and Edward Plummer on behalf of the congregation.

The 'great things God has wrought' included delivery from times of persecution, the levels of which are difficult to verify, although not inconsiderable<sup>44</sup> if they followed the pattern of that experienced by the Bristol Baptists, including Andrew Gifford, or those of John Bunyan.<sup>45</sup> Fines and imprisonment would have been usual, but there are no extant Quarter Sessions or Ilchester Gaol records for this period. A Richard Gay appears among the lists of those arrested and committed to Newgate Prison, London, 'by his Grace the Duke of Albemarle General of his Ma<sup>ties</sup> forces, for assembling unlawfully together contrary to a late Act of Parliament 28<sup>th</sup> October 1662'.<sup>46</sup> Whether Gay spent long there is not evident, for the warrant for release dated 2 January 1662/3 instructed Sir Richard Browne:

To discharge & release out of Newgate all such as haue been brought thither from vnlawfull meetings & ag<sup>t</sup> whom there is no oth<sup>r</sup> accusaçon w<sup>th</sup> liberty to him to deteine such as he shall thinke dangerously seditious as Preachers &c.

In 1666 Joseph Langton, brother of Sir Thomas Langton the mayor of Bristol for that year, purchased the manor of Newton St Loe, immediately adjacent to Haycombe. The Langtons were prominent Bristol Merchant Venturers, and Joseph, 'like so many merchants of the period, invested the inherited profits of trade in buying a country seat'.<sup>47</sup> Indeed the Langtons also owned land at Haycombe, predominantly farmed by the Gays; whilst the Gays farmed Langton land at Barrow Farm. The roots of antagonism are clear between these neighbours of clearly contrasting character, and there is no reason to believe that Joseph Langton would behave any differently towards the dissenters in his vicinity than his brother towards those in Bristol. In 1663 Thomas Langton, 'being not long since Sheriff & a Capt'

of y<sup>e</sup> Militia receiued a box on y<sup>e</sup> Eare from said M<sup>r</sup> Knight & withall drew his sword vpon him in y<sup>e</sup> Councell house' for harshly treating those arrested for 'y<sup>e</sup> vnlawfulness of their assembling'.<sup>48</sup> Sir John Knight was charged with being too lenient with 'Quakers & Sectarists', a situation which was soon to change. Much later in April 1683, during particularly violent persecution, Andrew Gifford's church and the Broadmead congregation met on the Somerset side of the river from Bristol, where they thought the justices of the peace less active than in Gloucestershire. They were wrong and were next morning brought before Justice Langton at Whitchurch, and bound over to appear at Ilchester and later imprisoned for a while.<sup>49</sup>

Evidence of correspondence between John Bunyan and Richard Gay no longer exists, although testimony to it is strong. Bunyan's imprisonments between 1660 and 1672<sup>50</sup> correspond with periods when Gay too may have been imprisoned. We know of Richard Gay's involvement in the Thomas Collier affair in which Nehemiah Coxe was a key player. Coxe had become a member of John Bunyan's church in Bedford on 14 June 1669, before himself being called to minister to a Baptist congregation.<sup>51</sup> Networks and links between Baptist and Independent leaders were strong during this period. John Bunyan died in August 1688, but there is evidence of a Bunyan volume posthumously published being presented to Richard Gay in 1692. A surviving note, possibly a book plate, shows that the work 'Is presented to My Honoured Christian Brother Mr Richard Gay Minister of the Glorious Gospel At Haycomb in Somerset = Shire By Charles Doe [Bunyan's publisher] Because of his good Will in Subscribing to the Printing of the book in 1692'.<sup>52</sup>

At the end of the century Richard Gay, now elderly, was still active in local and national Baptist life. He represented Haycombe at the General Assembly of Baptists in London 3-12 September 1689, 9-16 June 1690 and 2-8 June 1691.<sup>53</sup> From 1692 it was proposed that the General Assembly should meet in both London and Bristol, each meeting sending Messengers to the other. The Western churches had been meeting locally in Association for a few years prior to this national provision, shown by the circular letter of 29 March 1692 from Frome calling for an association meeting 'at Westbury, at brother Cator's house, in the year 1693'. This letter, written by Andrew Gifford, was signed by Robert Cox, Roger Cator, Richard Gay, Richard Iterly, William Cray, Lancelot Spurrier and Thomas Whinnell. Richard Gay is also recorded as present at the 1694 and 1697 Easter Assemblies at Bristol.

#### 4 UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE STORY

The last reference to Richard Gay the minister appears to be the 1704 document in which he and his son John (1666-1729) exchange land with Joseph Langton.<sup>54</sup> Comparison of the way that the story has been passed down and reconstruction of what we can discover about him from other sources suggests the 'legend' is largely true. After Richard Gay's death the family continued to live and farm the land at Haycombe until the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>55</sup>

John Gay died in 1729, aged 63, leaving his widow Jane (née Cater), son Richard,

aged 12, and daughters Anna, 19, Elizabeth, 14, and Jane, 3. Two other children, Richard and Mary, had died at or soon after birth. Richard died in 1736, aged 19, and Elizabeth in 1742/3 aged 28.<sup>56</sup> One early account of Richard Gay referred to 'Granmama', 'mama' and 'aunt'. If the women referred to were Jane Gay, and her daughters Anna and Jane, this would date the episode described to around 1743. Anna Gay married Thomas Attwater and had children named Gay Thomas, Marianne, Caroline and Jane. Perhaps this account was written by Gay Thomas Attwater, whose sister Marianna's version would later appear in her funeral sermon by William Jay, while their sister Jane's version would be appended to the family copy of their great-grandfather's sermon notes. Within a few years all traces of the Gay family at Haycombe had vanished. One version of the story suggested that the Haycombe house was built in 1665. The present house, known as Haycombe Farm, has a stone marked 1766 high up on a wall,<sup>57</sup> at which date the property was rebuilt. It is significant therefore that the version of the story passed down through the descendants of Gay Thomas Attwater refers to the time 'when that house was burnt'. By the last known reference to the Gay family at Haycombe around 1751 it appears that life was increasingly lonely and difficult on the farm.<sup>58</sup>

Succeeding generations of the family have preserved the story, keen to preserve the family name, and their pride in Richard Gay as ancestor. A cursory glance through the Gay family tree shows how keenly the name was preserved at certain times, even when no longer a surname. Amongst Richard Gay's great-grandchildren we find Gay Thomas Attwater, in the fourth generation John Gay Attwater (1763-1799), in the fifth Thomas Gay Attwater (d.1885) and John Gay Attwater (1826-1895), and in the sixth Gay Thomas Attwater (1828-1891) and Richard Gay Attwater (1848-1899). Descendants finding the story significant and inspirational explain its survival in this form. These include Jane Blatch (née Attwater, Baptist poetess and diarist), whose own personal memory is fused with the family memory: she remembers her mother telling of her grandfather's tearful account of his imprisonment and the faithfulness of God in those hard times. The pride Marianna Head (née Attwater) took in her pious ancestor was made clear to those present at her funeral; and Sarah Wassell (née Attwater) took her family story well into the next century. Jane, the sister of Anne Steele (née Cater, Baptist diarist, 1684-1769), married John Gay of Haycombe, son of the Richard Gay of this study. The Steele family clearly loved their regular visits to Haycombe during the early eighteenth century.<sup>59</sup> The Reeves and Whitaker families of Bratton, influential in the story of nonconformity in the Westbury area of Wiltshire, about whom Marjorie Reeves has written, also feature among Richard Gay's descendants.<sup>60</sup> Marjorie Reeves' great-grandfather was the Philip Whitaker who on 6 March 1820 neatly copied the family tree and notes copied by Gay Thomas Attwater.

The quality and influence with which the story is invested by the family storytellers is matched by the accuracy of the details given, despite its legendary appearance. It may be that the story of Richard Gay has taken on the proportions of

'myth' in that it has moulded the family that owns it, in the way that such stories often do,<sup>61</sup> giving rise to the rich nonconformist dissenting vein flowing from it, by a conscious or an unconscious process.

Daniel Bertaux and Paul Thompson stress the importance of family as

the main channel for the transmission of language, names, land and housing, local social standing, and religion; and beyond that also of social values and aspirations, fears, world views, domestic skills, taken-for-granted ways of behaving, attitudes to the body, models of parenting and marriage.<sup>62</sup>

and an important part of this transmission is the memories that are passed on:

Family stories are the grist of social description, the raw material for both history and social change; but we need to listen to them more attentively than that. They are also the symbolic coinage of exchange between generations, of family transmission. They may haunt, or inspire, or be taken as commonplace. But the way in which they are told, the stories and images which are chosen and put together, and the matters on which silence is kept provides part of the mental map of the family members ... Family myths, models, and denials, transmitted within a family system, provide for most people part of the context in which their crucial life choices must be made, propelling them into their own individual life paths.<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, the written church histories gradually diminish the significance of the story, abbreviating details and increasing errors. In the family versions of the story of Richard Gay, the women are attributed with having passed the story on orally, whilst the men wrote it down. The one exception appears to be Jane Blatch, who attributes the story to her grandmother; but Jane is a known diarist and poet.

In the late seventeenth century when to be a dissenter, a nonconformist, meant to pay the price for holding such a position, it is easy to understand the influence of the story of an ancestor like Richard Gay. The durability of the dissenting tradition is seen where members of the community know the stories that mark them off as a different and a persecuted people. Here stories are a major source of identity and security as family and church; they constitute the memory of the community. In an era when it means nothing to be different, without persecution to demand clear demarcation of community boundaries, interest is gradually lost and churches tell their story uncritically and idiosyncratically. Yet families and churches need their story, their memory, to live in the present. Charles Elliot argues that

This function of the Church as the ark of memory requires that the Church (or significant representatives of her) are, as it were, conscious of the memory. They tell the story. They hear the story told. There is an interchange between those who know the memory and those who value it but know it imperfectly.<sup>64</sup>

He observes that any institution, including families and churches, 'that has lost its memory would be as confused and directionless as any memoryless individual'.<sup>65</sup>

In families, churches and communities today, questions of identity are raised again and the question, 'Who are we?', is asked in a new way. It is hoped that exploration



of this story may contribute towards the process of memory recovery for those Baptist churches in whose own story Richard Gay of Haycombe played such an influential part. There is sufficient evidence to confirm the integrity of the story faithfully transmitted by family and community descendants of Richard Gay since the early years of the eighteenth century. If the story is forgotten, how will it be remembered again? If it cannot be remembered, who can know who they are?

## NOTES

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- 4 Jane Blatch, Biographical Note on Richard Gay appended to his Sermon, 1802, MS in Angus Library, pp.17-18.
- 5 Philip Cater, *Memoirs of the Life and Character of the Later Rev. John Paul Porter*, Bath 1834, pp.58-9; William Tuck, *Notes on the History of Argyle Chapel, Bath*, Bath 1906, p.3; R.H. Moore, *Historical Survey. In Praise and Progress, being a Brief History and Account of the Present Work at Manvers Street Baptist Church, Bath*, edited by L.C. Parkinson. Bath 1980, p.4; Ralph F. Chambers, 'Where Heated Waters Spring: The Story of the Strict Baptist Chapels of Bath', n.d., Typescript, Bath Central Library., p.3; Robert W. Oliver, *Wiltshire and the West. Vol. 5, The Strict Baptist Chapels of England*, 1968, p.83; Charles Attryde and Leslie H. Moore, *Two Hundred Years of Ministry and Witness: The Story of the Baptist Fellowship meeting in the City of Bath ... 1752 to 1972*, Bath 1972, p.2.  
Blatch, *op.cit.*; Anon. MS Account of Gay Family Ancestry, including Richard Gay, MS n.d. but probably late eighteenth century, Marjorie Reeves' Private Collection, referred to in Reeves, 1997, pp.8 & 211-3, as MS(a), p.1; Philip Whitaker, Family Tree and Notes: Descent from Gay Family of Haycombe, MS 1820, Marjorie Reeves Private Collection, pp.1-2; David Wassell-Smith, MS Copy of Notebook containing an Account of Gay Family Ancestry, including Richard Gay, MS n.d. but early twentieth century, Marjorie Reeves' Private Collection, referred to in Reeves, 1997, pp.8 & 211-3, as MS(b), pp.1-8. Dr Reeves has referred to her distant Gay ancestry in *Sheepbell & Ploughshare: The Story of Two Village Families*, Trowbridge 1978, pp.28, 49, 62; Marjorie Reeves and Jean Morrison, eds., *The Diaries of Jeffery Whitaker Schoolmaster of Bratton, 1739-1741*, Trowbridge 1989, p.89; and Marjorie Reeves, *Pursuing the Muses: Female Education and Nonconformist Culture 1700-1900*, 1997, pp.3, 8, 211-3.
- 6 Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists*, 4 vols, 1811-30, ii, p.558.
- 7 Reeves, *op.cit.*, 1997, p.3. I am grateful to Dr Reeves for sight of her manuscript prior to publication. The book refers to Richard Gay and in Ch.1, n.8 to two MS family papers. Dr Reeves concludes that 'They give a curious mixture of half-truth and fantasy, illustrating vividly the way family legends arise and are passed on.
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- 10 Jean Manco, *The Parish of Englishcombe: A History*, Bath 1955, pp.6-7.
- 11 Elizabeth Holland and R. Bryant, Mayors of Bath from 1567, MS n.d., Bath City Record Office.; Shickle, ed., Bath City Council Minutes, MS n.d., 28 September 1614.
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  - 20 Somerset Wills: Sherwood MSS, DD/SAS C/795 FA 22/4, Somerset County Record Office, P.C.C. Evelyn 150.
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  - 22 Wroughton, *op.cit.*.
  - 23 Norman Penney, ed., *"The First Publishers of Truth": Being Early Records (Now First Printed) of the Introduction of Quakerism into the Counties of England and Wales*, 1907, pp.227-8.
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  - 26 Wroughton, *op.cit.*
  - 27 Elspeth Graham, Hilary Hinds, Elaine Hobby, and Helen Wilcox, eds., *Her Own Life: Autobiographical writings by seventeenth-century Englishwomen*, 1989, pp.116-8.
  - 28 Ecclesiastical History in *Victoria County History: Somerset*, 1911, p.59.
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  - 30 Phyllis Hembry, *The English Spa 1560-1815: A Social History*, 1990, pp.12-13, 32-33, 61-62.
  - 31 Norman Penney, ed., *Extracts from State Papers Relating to Friends 1654-1672*. 1913, p.107.
  - 32 Wroughton, *op.cit.*
  - 33 Thompson Cooper, 'Thomas Collier', *DNB*.
  - 34 Thomas Collier, *The Pulpit-Guard Routed, In Its Twenty Strong-Holds. Or, A brief Answer, To a large and lawless Discourse, Written by one Tho. Hall of Kings-Norton, Intituled, The Pulpit Guarded, With Twenty Arguments, Pretending to prove the unlawfulness, and sinfulness of Private mens Preaching*, 1652, 2 edn., p.35.
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- 41 Land, *op.cit.*, pp.279-80.
- 42 Thomas Collier, 1677, pp.15-16; Roger Hayden, 'Evangelical Calvinism among Eighteenth Century British Baptists with particular reference to Bernard Foskett, Hugh and Caleb Evans and the Bristol Baptist Academy, 1690-1791', PhD thesis, Keele University, 1991, pp.9-10.
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