

Transactions

of the

Baptist Historical Society.

Bunyan's Licence under the Indulgence

and the use he made of it in his
Visit to Leicester in October, 1672.

THOMPSON refers to Bunyan's visit to Leicester in his History of Leicester, p. 430, in the following terms:—

“In 1672, Oct., the celebrated John Bunyan visited Leicester—for the purpose apparently of preaching to the Society of Baptists”; and adds, “He produced his Licence before the Mayor and justices.” In a footnote to this sentence, Thompson says:—“The following is a copy of it, the original is among the Hall papers.” The words he proceeds to cite show that it is not a copy of the Licence, but only a *précis* of its contents. They are an exact transcript of the note in the Hall Papers.

“John Bunnyons Licence beares date the ninth day of May 1672 to teach as a congregational pson being of that pswasion in the house of Josias Roughead in the Towne of Bedford, or in

any other place, roome, or house Licensed by his Matie.

“Memord. the said Bunnyon shewed his License to Mr. Mayor, Mr. Overing, Mr. freeman, and Mr. Browne being here p^rsent the vjth day of Octobr 1672, being Sunday.”

That the précis thus entered in Leicester Town “Hall Papers” accurately represents the substance of the original Licence is shown by the entry in E.B. 38a, on p. 93—which Dr. Whitley correctly reproduces in his article (on p. 17). It will be noted that the Town in which Roughead's house was situated was at first omitted from the licence-entry; and that it was added, in a most irregular way, *after* the date

In essentials the two, the précis in the Hall papers and the entry in E.B. 38a, are identical.

1. The denomination is the same in both—“Congregationall.” In this respect, Dr. Whitley's transcriber of the Hall minute has omitted the words that state his denomination, and that in an unusual and significantly emphatic way—giving us two “dots” in their place. They are:—“as a congregationall pson* being of that pswasion.”

The bearing of this fact on the place where Bunyan preached that day in Leicester, is so direct and important, that attention needs to be directed to it—rather than diverted from it—by those dots. I deal with it later.

2. The date is the same in both:—

In the Licence Entry, it is “9 May.” In the Minute in the Hall Paper, it is stated with equal clearness. Indeed it is given in words—a form less unmistakable than figures. A figure might be so badly formed as to be misinterpreted. But the Leicester minute has it

* Whether “pson” was meant for “person” or “parson” does not appear; tho' it was most probably meant to be for the former.

"John Bunnyons License beares date the ninth day of May 1672," so that—as clearly as good Saxon English can express it—the date his licence bore is identical with that with which it is entered in the Entry Book—now in the Public Record Office.

So that there is no "conflict of evidence" as to the date of the licence (as Dr. Whitley affirms on p. 16 of his article) to receive attention; and no discrepancy to explain.

Dr. Whitley has been ill-served by his informant as to the Leicester visit and the Minute entered on the 6th October 1672: who has given him such needless trouble, and has done him so ill a turn in offering him as an "accurate statement" of the facts—one which on this one vital point is so clearly wrong.

The long paragraph which follows with its three conceivable explanations is thus altogether "aside the mark" and "needless." It, moreover, contains three misunderstandings or mistakes with reference to my dealing with the subject of licence-dates, which I have communicated to him: but which it would subserve no generally useful purpose to insert here.

One other matter, touching this visit of Bunyan to Leicester (tho' not bearing on Dr. Whitley's article), is of such moment to all interested in the early history of Baptist nonconformity in Leicester that I venture to offer it here.

Thompson in a previous reference to this visit in his History (p. 42, note d) says:—"The house in which according to tradition he preached is still standing . . . nearly opposite to St. Nicholas Church," and was "for many years tenanted by a respectable family named Coultman. A tablet recording the fact was affixed to the front of the house: but a few years ago the houses were all pulled down to widen the street, so that all visible reminder of the visit has entirely disappeared."

These statements may be perfectly correct; but I cannot think that the tradition which made any house in the possession of the Coultmans the Baptist Meeting House where Bunyan preached on Oct. 6, 1672, is much to be relied on.

I have made a fairly thorough search for any traces of the "Coltmans" settled in Leicester in the 17th century; but I have come upon nothing to suggest that any of them were Nonconformists, much less that any of them were definitely Baptists.

There is no doubt that the Coultmans were a respectable and respected family, and some representatives of the family had influential positions in Leicester in the 17th century.

There was a Francis Coultman who came to Leicester about the middle of the reign of Charles I, who was a Common Councilman for over twenty years, and then in the reign of Charles II was elected Alderman, retaining the honour till his death. There was a Matthew Coultman; and there were two William Coultmans, one of whom was a minister ("clerke"); and four others—Thomas, John, James and Abraham—all distinguishable in the local records, both in the Hall Papers and in the Parochial Registers. The name is sometimes spelt "Coultman," and sometimes "Coltman."

This latter form of the name is also sometimes a variant of *Coleman*; and of the *Colemans* several are distinctly Nonconformist.

There was a Richard Coleman, Apothecary, in the parish of St. Martins—and John his son—who suffered much for their Nonconformity; and others of the same name were distinguished Nonconformists in other parts of Leicester County, south and south-east of Leicester town. The particulars of these I have collated from the Parish Registers and the Leicester Probate Register, which I could furnish if

Leicester Baptists are strongly enough represented on the subscription list of the B.H.S., to desire and to warrant their reproduction in the *Transactions*.

Richard Coleman, Apothecary, so won the confidence of his fellow townsmen that he was elected to the Common Council in 1642, and after nearly twenty years of service as Common Councilman, was elected Alderman. Ten years later we find him exercising his power as a free Burgess of Leicester by voting for Hexbridge and Stanley to be the two Members for Leicester. [If 1652, it was for the Long Parliament just on the eve of dissolution by Cromwell; if 1652 should be read 1653, it would be for Oliver's First Parliament.]

In 1654 it is probable that Richard Coleman adopted Baptist views. In 1661 he was elected Alderman and Seneschal of Leicester.

In the Lay Subsidy for 1661-2—a Hearth Tax—his name appears in Alderman Baber's Ward:—

Richard Coleman—4 Hearths.

Evidently a commodious home.

In the Hall Book for 1664 we find both Richard the father, his wife, and John the son, presented for Nonconformity:

“ 1664, Apr. Ricus Coleman, Apothecary & ... uxor eius
presented the last Sessions } for not coming to
and to appear on summons } Divine Service for
a month last past
Johes Coleman Apothecary p consimil ”

Of their persecution for Nonconformity the Consistory Court Records take up the tale. In November of the same year, 1664, we have this entry:

“ Richard Coleman, Apothecary } for not coming to
& Elizabetham uxorem ejus } the parish Church
23. Nov. 1664

And the marginal note is added: “ex” i.e. excommunicated.

The following year they are presented again for the same offence:

" 1665, Ap. 12. (Sti. Martini Leicestrice)

Richardum Coleman Apothecary } for not coming to
& uxorem ejus } Church—ex "

He is presented again in 1666, as of St. Martins:
" Richardum Coleman Pharmacopolem—'stands ex half a year':—

later in the same year being fined vijs and excommunicate

and also in *All Saints* ('omnium Sanctorum Leicr')

Richard Coleman, Apothecary, refusing to pay to the repair of the Church 3^s 4^d

To this entry a note is appended which shews that the ecclesiastical authorities—having done their worst—hand him over to the civic authorities to deal with him under the Statute 'de excommunicato capiendo'—arresting him and throwing him into Leicester gaol.

'Stat. ex. *in carcere* II Sept. 1667'

Now this Richard Coleman, four or five years after his release from gaol, in 1672 secured a licence under Charles's Indulgence as a Baptist, for his house to be allowed as a Meeting Place for Baptists; and this is the only licence for Baptists entered in either Arlington's or Trevor's Entry Books. It would be most natural, therefore, to infer that this was the house to which John Bunyan went on that Sunday Oct. 6, 1672, direct from the Town Hall to preach to the Baptists gathered there to give him an enthusiastic welcome; and that this was the house tradition pointed to as having been honoured in this way. The variation in the name of the owner—Coleman—instead of Coultman may be explained—either through a simple and easy confusion in the form of the name, or through the house which was Richard Coleman's in 1672—passing

by demise or sale—in later days—into the hands of a *Coultman*.

Unfortunately, however, the dates involved make that supposition practically impossible.

John Bunyan—wise man!—had secured his licence in the month of May: but Richard Coleman—the only Leicester Baptist who gets a licence at all—had been hesitating—perhaps refusing—to apply for a licence under this autocratic dispensation of the King; so that when Bunyan came there was no house or Meeting Place in Leicester belonging to a Baptist “allowed or licensed” for him to preach in. Indeed Richard Coleman didn't apply for a licence for another two months after John Bunyan had come and gone; that it not until Dec. 9, which would give him only two months to enjoy the use of it, before the Indulgence was withdrawn.

[It is entered on p. 281 of Entry Book 38a.

“The house of Rich. Coleman in the Burrough of Leicester, Baptist. December ye 9th 1672”]

Now John Bunyan dared not preach or conduct Nonconformist worship in any house not licensed by the King; for in his Declaration of Indulgence he had given his subjects a very plain warning:—

“If, after this Our clemency and indulgence, any of our subjects shall pretend” (i.e. presume) “to abuse this liberty, and shall . . . meet in places not allowed by us, we do hereby give them warning, and declare we will proceed against them with all imaginable severity.”

He could go, therefore, only to one of the four Meeting Places in Leicester which had been licensed before Oct. 6, 1672. Three of them were for Presbyterians: Gabriel Major's, William Billers's, and Timothy Wood's. These, however, were practically excluded; as John Bunyan's licence was granted to him as a “Congregational” person, he being of that

persuasion—and the Mayor and Justices would see to it that he went only to a house licensed for Congregationalists.

The fourth place licensed before October 6 was *Nicholas Kestian's* house, who had been ejected from Gumley, and who had secured licences for himself and his house in Leicester as entered on p. 179 of Entry Book 38a. They are not dated; but apparently they belong to the month of June—nearly four months before Bunyan came to Leicester—"Kestian" is changed into "Keston" but clearly Nicholas Kestian's house is meant. The entry reads:

E (179) "The howse of Nich. Keston in Leicester,
for Congr.

Licence to Nicholas Keston to be a Congr.
Teacher in his howse in Leicester."

The most natural thing, therefore, for the "Congregational" John Bunyan to do was to go to the house of Nicholas Kestian, who would have had notice of his intended visit, and who (with his own people) would be prepared to give John Bunyan a royal welcome—making room gladly for as many Anti-pædo-baptists, and Presbyterians, who were eager to hear him, as the Meeting-Place would hold.

Nor do I think that any large-hearted Baptist will refuse to concede that the facts revealed in this Leicester visit give another proof of what Dr. Brown has so fully established as the fact that John Bunyan did not make so much of his Baptist views as to unchurch or slight his fellow Congregationalists who did not share them. The form of the licence which he brought with him to Leicester, and showed to the Mayor and Justices of Leicester that Sunday morning, is proof of that. What he was eager to emphasise was that he was a Congregationalist, as distinct from the Presbyterians from whose clerical assumptions he had (like so many others) suffered so much in the

Commonwealth days. So he had not tampered with his licence, as he could have done, had he felt that he was misdescribed in it, and as Andrew Gifford of Bristol did—erasing the word “Presbyterian” by scoring it through, and scrawling above it in very black ink, the word “Baptist.” Any one may see it—as I have done—in the library of the Bristol Baptist College. No: he was content to call himself a “Congregational” Nonconformist. He applied for his Licence under that denomination—and secured it in that form—and as a “Congregational person” he came to Leicester to preach to his fellow Congregationalists, whether Pædobaptist or Anti-pædobaptist, and to as many others, Presbyterians or even Anglicans, as cared to crowd in to Nicholas Kestian's modest Meeting-Place to hear the famous Bedford tinker-preacher and author.

No doubt Richard Coleman was there, and his son John: and I fancy that when he realized he was defrauded of the coveted honour of having John Bunyan preach in his house through his not having taken out a Licence, he began seriously to consider that he had better do as John Bunyan had done; and so at last, after two months' further deliberation, he actually brought himself to do so.

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N.B.—The transcript of the Leicester records was made for Jukes' *History of Bunyan's Church*, whence it was quoted in 1863 by Offor in his introduction to the three-volume *Works of John Bunyan*, with special attention drawn to the discrepancy. We may be thankful that at last the transcript is challenged, and it is shown there was no discrepancy.

W. T. WHITLEY.