

AYLESBURY CELEBRITIES OF THE LAST CENTURY

Transcription of handwritten notes by Robert Gibbs dated May 1st 1877

Mr. S.G. Payne of Aylesbury has photographed and re-published copies of old and scarce portraits of some celebrities of Aylesbury of the last century, amongst others one of Hugh Barker Bell Esq.

The name of Bell has been associated with Aylesbury for many generations. He is met with as early as the year 1598, at which period one Robert Bell was instituted as vicar of the parish. In 1651 the names of Anthony Bell and Henry Bell are attached to a local document, and in 1667 one Joseph Bell was a mercer in the town; he must have been a person of some repute as he issued his own tokens, some of which are still extant. Joseph Bell Gent was one of the original trustees of the Aylesbury Free School under the will of Sir Henry Lee of Quarrendon and Ditchley.

There were two families of Bell, the lawyers Bell and the farmers Bell. The lawyer Bells became extinct by the death of Hugh Barker Bell the younger; the farmer Bells exist in the present day. Hugh Barker Bell the elder was an attorney and was Registrar of the Archdeanery of Bucks.

In Aylesbury Churchyard is an altar tomb to the memory of Barker of Great Horwood and his family arms are on the tomb; the dates of their deaths (of Joseph and Celia Bell) are 1738 and 1739. They were the parents of Hugh Barker Bell the elder. There are also several memorials of the Bell family in Aylesbury Church but most of them have been removed from their original positions. In

the west side of the south transept was a monument to the memory of William Bell, son of Joseph and Celia Bell, who died in 1745 aged 24 years on board His Majesty's ship the "Medway" at Batavia in the East Indies, "where he went to serve his country with courage and cheerfulness".

Arms: S. a fess Em. between three Bells arg. Crest on a wreath arg. and S. an eagle volant; at bottom in bas relief, a ship under sail.

On another tablet surmounted by an Urn is an inscription to the memory of a daughter of the same parents who died in 1751.

In the S.W. angle of the same transept on an altar monument of white marble, with a pyramid of veined marble, between two sculptured urns is inscribed (Fig. 1).

This lady was the wife of Hugh Barker Bell the elder and mother of the Barker Bell represented in the portrait.

Hugh Barker Bell the younger is in some accounts called son of "Register Bell". He was also an attorney and succeeded his father in the Registrarship of the Archdeanery; he was a Fellow of New College, Oxon, and educated for the Bar. Unfortunately from some cause not recorded, the balance of his mind was disturbed and he became imbecile. He was a man of fine stature, tall and robust, and in his earlier days must have been a splendid specimen of youth. The portrait exhibits him in his deplorable condition of lunacy. He is

*To the memory of Anne
This monument is erected
In testimony
For the best of wives;
To her husband near eleven years
By her neighbours and acquaintances
On the 16th day of May 1749*

*Wife of Hugh Barker Bell Esq.
By a most disconsolate Husband
of the greatest and most deserved affection
Who after having been a real blessing
And through her whole life universally respected
Died Much lamented by all
Aged 33*

Figure 1 Inscription to Anne Barker Bell

always represented in the same dress and attitude holding in one hand a drinking cup. The portrait copied is one of an early date; the original is supposed to have been from the pencil of Mortimer.

Bell's companion in the picture is one Reg Oviatts (not Ivatts) also an Aylesbury celebrity. This man was a working collar maker and a hanger-on to his patron. They were seldom seen in the streets excepting in the company of each other and they spent their time in idling about from one public house to another. The house represented is the Bull's Head which was the favourite haunt of Hugh Barker Bell and kept by one Martin. There were two families of this name, Martin the stationer and the Walton Martins; the then landlord of the Bull's Head is supposed to have been one of the latter family.

Poor Barker Bell was perfectly harmless nor is it recorded of him that he ever transgressed the rules of propriety; he would play pranks with the boys in the streets to whom he was a welcome companion as he was liberal in the distributions of his pence amongst them. This singular character died in 1792 at a full age and was the last representative of the family.

Another scarce portrait Mr. Payne has reproduced is that of Pat Alexander. Pat, who was also a great celebrity in her day, kept a coffee house in the Market Square. This house was afterwards a public house known as the "Green Man" and is the second house from the upper side of the opening to the Bull's Head Inn. Pat's coffee house was one of great resort by the impulsive politicians of the period. Her portrait is from a picture by Hamilton and it was engraved by Faber in 1739. A copy of the "Craftsman" is represented as lying before the old lady. From this feature in the picture we may pretty well infer the political bias of Pat's coffee house patrons. The Craftsman was a publication which was unsparing in its denunciation of the policy of the administration of Sir Robert Walpole, prime minister to George 2nd.

This paper was carried on for many years with great spirit and several of its contributors came to grief in consequence of their connection with it. Franklyn the printer had to defend a government prosecution for libel as did Henry Haines who also printed it. Under Nicholas Amhurst it was published as a daily and he was connected with it for many years; he died in 1742 of a broken heart

and in great poverty having been greatly neglected by those whom he had essentially served with his pen. He had in early life been in a good position, was educated at Merchant Taylors school, London and at St. John's College, Oxford; he was buried at the expense of Richard Franklyn his printer.

Pat Alexander is chronicled as having "departed this life in 1741 aged 85 years". Pat was connected with the Asbury family, a very old Aylesbury name now extinct; the last male representative of it being Tommy Asbury the coadjutor of Jenny Tuckwell. These were two very important personages in electioneering movements at Aylesbury in the early years of the present century.

This is a transcription of a handwritten set of notes recently found in the Society archives, which appears to have been intended to be delivered as a talk by Gibbs at an early Society meeting, although no published record of the talk has been found (BAS ref: 2009.159).

Robert Gibbs' 1885 book "A History of Aylesbury" contains some of the information written here, notably descriptions of the Aylesbury Church monuments, details of Pat Alexander's coffee house and a print of a Joseph Bell token (p.409). "Bucks Local Record, volume II, 1700-1800" published by Gibbs in 1879, mentions Henry Haines libel case (p.75) and records the death of Pat Alexander (p.78).

Hanley and Hunt's "Aylesbury: A Pictorial History" (Phillimore 1993) notes that Ceely House was re-fronted by Hugh Barker Bell in the mid eighteenth century and converted to a town house.

The document is accompanied by one faded black and white photograph and one portrait both by Mr. S.G.Payne of No. 1 New Road Terrace, Aylesbury, but they are not the portraits alluded to in the notes, of Hugh Barker Bell and Pat Alexander.

The photograph is of William Stevens, the "Waddesdon Giant", a tenant farmer at Lodge Hill, Waddesdon, who died, aged 46, on Good Friday, March 31st 1877. At the time of his death, he lodged at the Five Arrows Inn. He was reputed to weigh 38 stones and died after consuming a

large breakfast of bacon, sausages and hot cross buns. A bay window had to be taken out in order to remove his body from the building.

(Carr and Gurney 1996. *Waddesdon's Golden Years 1874–1925. Waddesdon Manor: The Alice Trust, p.96*)

The faded portrait features two portly gentlemen facing each other, each with a cup in his hand. Closer inspection suggests that it is actually a photograph of two separate portraits, placed side by side. The figure on the left has been identified as Dann Heart, a collar maker, whom Gibbs may have mistaken for the Reg Oviatts mentioned in his paper:

An identical watercolour portrait of Dann Heart has been located in the County Museum's granger-

ized Lipscomb (volume II) between pages 26 and 27. The caption reads:

“Born at the 3 Tuns in Aylesbury, was educated through the industry of his parents, after which he faithfully served his apprenticeship at Whitchurch and made a good tradesman but became very corpulent, in consequence of which he makes a laughing merry companion and constantly enjoys his Pipe and Pot

Drawn by G. Bull, Aylesbury, 1793”

Whether the other “corpulent” in the photograph is actually Hugh Barker Bell has yet to be established. Perhaps Society members can shed light on the identity of the second man?

Sue Fox