

# **GREAT STAUGHTON AND ITS PEOPLE**

**HOW A HUNTINGDONSHIRE VILLAGE LEFT ITS MARK ON ENGLAND'S  
HISTORY**

by

**Anthony Withers**

**Copyright © 2022 Anthony Withers**

The moral right of Anthony Withers to be identified as the Author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission, in writing, of the Author, or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics rights organisation.

## The Protestation Returns of 1641

In May 1641, in the months leading up to the outbreak of the first Civil War, Parliament was becoming increasingly concerned that the Protestant Reformation was in serious danger of failing and a ten-man committee was established to investigate how a potential political and religious crisis could be averted. The committee's solution was to draft a declaration, essentially an oath of loyalty or Protestation, which citizens would be obliged by law to sign on pain of punishment. This essentially Protestant document was in reality a slight to the Catholic king. Everyone over the age of eighteen was obliged to sign; those who refused were barred from public office. Rudimentary though it may have been, it was the first such census to be systematically carried out until 1801 and it reveals much about the demography of the village at the time.

MPs, ministers, constables and overseers of the poor were the first to take the oath, and they would then be responsible for continuing the work in their towns and villages. The names of all those who had taken the oath were dutifully recorded and in the case of the county of Huntingdonshire, all the Protestation Returns have survived, providing a fascinating picture of life during a revolutionary period in English history.

The oath begins: *I ... do, in the presence of Almighty God, promise, vow, and protest to maintain, and defend as far as lawfully I may ... the true Reformed Protestant religion, expressed in the Doctrine of the Church of England, against all Popery and Popish Innovations.* The Protestation concludes: *'that I shall, in all just and honourable ways, endeavour to preserve the Union and Peace betwixt the Three Kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland.* The oath requires that the citizen shall *live and die for the true Protestant religion, the liberties and rights of subjects and the privilege of Parliaments.*

The principal officials responsible for supervising the Protestation in Great Staughton were Sir Ludowicke Dier (Dyer), 'Knight and Barronett', Robert Paine and Abraham Burrell Esq, three of his 'Majs Justices of the Peace of this Countie', who have 'this present 16th February 1641 assembled ourselves for the taking of the Protestation'. They were assisted by other village officers: John Gaule and Thomas Laurence, both described as 'minister'; John Burrowes and John Carter, churchwardens; William Cole, John Issodd, and Henrie Tate, constables; and William Berrie, John Martine, John Dennis and John Barcock, 'Overseers for ye Poore'.

The list for 'Stoughton Magna' contains over 200 names, including two men who were absent when the oath was taken; Robert Johnson, 'who is at worke in Cambridgeshire' and John Robinson, who 'is at work in Bedfordshire'. Thus the population of the village in 1641 may well have been a sizeable 1,000 or 1,500 people.

The oath recorded the names of villagers but gave no indication of their status. However, from other records, in particular the churchwardens' accounts, we can quickly identify the wealthier citizens of the village by the donations they regularly made to support the poor. Some names are familiar from other contexts; the Baldwins, Thomas and John, wealthy landowners in the village for over a century, owned the Rectory Manor. The name of Edmund Ibbutt (or Ibbott) is commemorated in the village to the present day. In 1637 Ibbutt, a wealthy landowner in the village with lands in the manor of 'Bechemsteed', had erected the sundial on the Highway in 1637 where it can still be admired. It is thought that the sundial began life as a village cross, but Ibbutt decided that it would serve more usefully as a sundial. He also donated the second bell in the church in 1633. Two family names from the seventeenth century, which continued to be recorded to the twentieth century, are those of Edmund Darlow and Luke Ekins. Four Freshwaters appear in the

official transcript as well as John Greene, described as servant to Robert Freshwater. One woman, Millicent Rowland, took the oath; single women, widows as well as married women were also eligible to sign.

Other valuable records have been preserved and these provide complementary accounts of the village during these turbulent times; these include the churchwardens' accounts, the constables' 'Acomptes' and the church registers. A year prior to the Protestation, in the churchwardens' accounts for 31 May 1640, Edmund Ibbott (as his name appears) and Ralph Paine record all the furnishings and ornaments held by the church, as well as the land it owned; they list the duties and obligations of the rector and give details of payments to the poor. The most prominent objects in the church are the bells, of which there are five and 'one little bell, hanging betweene the church and the chauncell', i.e. the sanctus bell. In the belfry there is 'one clocke with all the parts and furniture thereof'. Various holy books are then listed, including 'one great new bible', a reference presumably to the King James Bible, published three decades earlier. There is also a register of births, marriages and deaths.

The church received many charitable donations, mainly of money but sometimes bequests of land from the wealthier residents of the village, mostly intended 'to the use of the poore people of this parishe of Stoughton Magna'. William Holland gave 'tenne poundes'; Robert Freshwater's dwelling in Agden Greene yielded an annual 'twentye shillings', which was donated for the relief of the poor. The poor also benefited to the tune of ten pounds from the bequest of Sir George Wauton, who died in 1606. Various other monetary donations are recorded, from 'fourtie shillings' to five pounds, 'the guifte of the ladie Swanne 1625' and twelve pounds and ten shillings from Thomas Peete in 1628. The money duly collected was lent out by the church and the accrued interest was used to give 'bread to the poor people of Stoughton magna at foure several times of the yeare'. The church was evidently a bank and had substantial landholdings in the village. To the south of the church, in the direction of the Manor of Staughton, a further, smaller parcel of land is noted; 'halfe an acre of land lieing on the hill in the Marshefelde towards Stoughton Parva (Little Staughton), abbuttinge on the land of Valentine Wawton esquire on the south'. Although he was no longer ordinarily resident in the village, Valentine Walton owned several tracts of land, on which he paid £6 6s 9d tax, representing more than fifty per cent of the total amount of tithes, £11 8s 3d, due in 1637 from the constituent parishes of Staughton (Dillington, 'Perrie', 'Bechempsteed' and Stonely).

The accounts reveal that the rector had other parochial duties, one of which proved to be onerous, as two entries reveal. The rector was obliged to make 'palmecakes' for the poor of the parish at Easter. For this, four bushels of 'wheate' were required 'to be yearlie paid out of the parsonage of Stoughton Magna by the Rector'. The wheat was duly ground into meal by the churchwardens, leaving the rector with the responsibility of finding firewood and a suitable place to bake the cakes, a task which fell to parishioners. However, the rector was obliged to provide 'meate and drinke, dureinge the time of the making of the same palmecakes'. The churchwardens' accounts record laconically that the practice was abandoned by Easter 1640 'by a consent of the minister, churchwardens and divers other parishioners'. The rector was also obliged to supply the Communion wine for all communicants within the parish at all times.

An interesting entry marks the beginning of the bell rope charity, which existed until various bequests were consolidated into the Parish Charities in the early years of the twentieth century. 'The Rector is likewise to find and allow belle-ropes for all the bells at all times, at his owne costs and charges, for which (it is said) he holdeth a parcell of land, being four selions, commonlie called

the belroapes.' A selion, a measurement of land, was one furlong (660 ft) long by one chain (66 ft) wide.

In 1642, mere months after the Protestation oaths were taken, the country was plunged into the first of the two Civil Wars, as detailed above. The bedrock of support for the Parliamentary cause was East Anglia and Cromwell and fellow Huntingdonshire MP Valentine Walton, were naturally anxious to strengthen local defences as the threat of war loomed ever larger. The *White Hart Inn* on the Highway became the headquarters and accommodation for a 'Courte of Guard', a detachment of constables who were billeted there from 1642. The inn was the guardhouse for both criminals and Royalist prisoners (called 'rebells', 'cavaleires' or 'mutyneires'), but it also served as company headquarters providing food and accommodation for the constables. A levy was raised in the village to pay for these forces of law and order. Those who fell behind with the levy were quickly rounded up and detained at the *White Hart*. The Constables' Accounts ('acomptes') for some of the constables have been preserved and provide an invaluable record of the effects of the Civil War on a village remote from the bloody conflict raging around them.

Henry (Henerie in the Protestation Returns) Bull was the constable for Staughton from 15 December 1643 to 3 February 1644 and in February 1644 he presented his accounts for approval; on 12 February Henry Bull received the levy, totalling £11 19s 6d to be spent on 'dyett horsemeate and fireing spent upon a Courte of guard then kept at the *White Heart* in Beechemstead'. Bull recorded that he paid out 15s for 'haie' for the constables' horses stabled at the inn.

One of the principal duties of the constables in 1643 was to ensure the movement of munitions to Parliamentary forces and to accommodate soldiers who were preparing to join the earl of Manchester's forces billeted in nearby Kimbolton. The need was urgent. The opening battle of the Civil War at Edgehill in October 1642 had been followed by four further inconclusive engagements and as 1643 approached the conflict intensified with no fewer than ten battles in the first half of the year. The earl of Manchester's forces required constant supplies of ammunition and on 13 October 1643, a levy was raised in Great Staughton, amounting to £11 13s, 'for the setting forth of cartes and teams to carye ammunition for the earl of Manchester's forces from Hunt [*sic*] and also from our town of Staughton'.

Parliamentary soldiers had also arrived in the village prior to joining the earl of Manchester's battalion and they needed lodgings; Goodwife Tollerton was paid 3s for 'quartering nyne soldiers one nighte'. When, on 1 February 1644 'Captaine Sparrow's troope' marched into Staughton, 16s was paid 'for a quarter of beans'. In the same month £7 10s was paid to 'Goodwife Peacocke for quartering the Court of Guard 20 daies'. To provide food for these soldiers, a Master Wye (not recorded in the Protestation Returns) was paid £7 10s for 'victuals for the Courte of Guard kept at the *White Harte* in Beechemstead'.

As well as maintaining public order and defending the village from 'cavaleires', one of the duties of the constables was to apprehend criminals. In one case, 2d was an 'Item paide for Carriage a hue and Crie to Pertenhall', in pursuit of a person suspected of a criminal offence.

From 12 February 1644 to 1 March 1645, Thomas Peacocke, presumably the husband of Goodwife Peacocke, assumed the office of constable for the town of 'great Stoughton and the Moore End, beginning ... the 12th daie of February 1644 And continued until the first daie of March 1645'. One of his first duties was to write out a warrant 'for teames to draw aertillerie for Maior general Craford's forces', which incurred an outlay of 3d. This is a reference to Major-General of Foot Lawrence Crawford, a Scottish soldier who joined the Eastern Association, served under the earl of Manchester and was killed in battle in August 1645.

The Courte of Guard was not the only official body tending to the parish of Great Staughton. The overseers of the poor were kept busy looking after those who had fallen on hard times. In 1645 for example 'John Chapmans wench' was so poor that not only did she have to be looked after but clothing had to be made for her. 'Item: paid to John Treyhearne for keeping John Chapmans wench 12 weekes 6s 0d.' Fourteen shillings was paid to purchase '4 yardes of woollen cloathe to make the wench a suite at 3s 6d the yard'. Her outfit included a 'pare of shooes at 1s 8d' and 'two paire of Stockinges at 3s 0d'. Three ells (an ell was roughly a yard) of 'hempteare' (best quality hemp) was purchased to provide her with two 'smockes' and an ell of Linsey Woolsley (a mixture of wool and flax) made two aprons. 'Byndinge, clasps and keepers' along with 'Stringes for her aprons' cost a further 3d and 'for makeinge her Cloathes' the sum of 1s 4d was paid.

In 1676 a census, restricted to men over the age of eighteen, was carried out in England by the ecclesiastical authorities with the principal aim of reassuring Charles II that the English population were true adherents of the Church of England. It found that in Great Staughton there were 373 conformists, two papists and fourteen Nonconformists.

Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660 and the land and manors of regicides such as Valentine Walton had already been sequestered by the Crown but by 1662 the king was in urgent need of £1.2 million to defray his household expenses. He therefore devised a deeply unpopular tax which was based on the number of hearths in any mansion or tenement. The Hearth Tax was set at two shillings for every fire-hearth or stove. The logic was that it was easier to count hearths than people. The tax was payable twice yearly, on the quarter days of Michaelmas, 29 September, and Lady Day, 25 March. When James Beverley took over Gaynes Hall from Thomas Lake, it contained no fewer than eleven hearths and his tax liability amounted to twenty-two shillings. Mr Baulding (possibly Baldwin is meant) had eight hearths and a Mr Gale (presumably John Gaule) five. Some relief was afforded to those dismayed at having to pay what they considered an iniquitous imposition on their income; they could drown their sorrows with the products of the local brewing victualler. Between 1626 and 1719, Great Staughton was one of the many villages that boasted this admirable facility.