

Francis Holcroft – “The Apostle of Cambridgeshire”

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Chapter I

The inscription on the grave of Francis Holcroft reads: To the glory of God, Francis Holcroft (1633-1692) "The Apostle of Cambridgeshire, and Joseph Oddy (1629-1687), 17th century pioneers of nonconformity in this area.

A little inside the bruised oak door of the Parish Church, on the right hand wall, there stands an ornate plaque beside the old stone font. It commemorates the previous “Rectors and Vicars of Bassingbourne”. Each is neatly annotated with name and year in inky black perfection. Space permits for just two more.

Back through recent times they take us, beyond the first great plague of 1347, when a Rector and two Vicars perished together with a third of England. At 1294 we find the earliest name, a nobleman Rector stationed overseas with most of Bassingbourn belonging to the earls of Richmond. But even this extensive list falls short of the Church’s foundation in Bassingbourn by some hundred years or so.

There is a name, however, that was deliberately missing. It is a period much later, when records are more thorough and the established Church is floundering in a sort of no-man’s land. The name is Francis Holcroft, graduating from Cambridge at the age of seventeen. (His name has recently been added.)

From his Fellow’s room above the gatehouse of Clare College, Francis Holcroft witnesses the sorry sight of a horse being brought round to the college gate on Sunday mornings and sent away again. Its intended rider, his colleague, the Vicar, is too drunk from the night before to make his preaching appointment at Litlington. Considering the people of Litlington deserve better, Holcroft is soon riding through Bassingbourn on Sunday mornings to preach there himself.

Then came the living of Bassingbourn at the tender age of twenty-two. Almost at once, the power of his preaching extended beyond the village boundaries and pulled in neighbouring villagers. He preached not just on holy days, but two or three times a week, a productivity almost unheard of among the Anglican clergy of the day. New members came from far and wide, making a commitment to God through a simple statement of belief before the congregation. Lives were changed, the old order set aside.

And yet within five years, Francis Holcroft was unceremoniously ejected from the living of Bassingbourn. In time steps were taken to eradicate all traces of his involvement in the Parish Church altogether.

For nine of the next twelve years he found himself incarcerated in Cambridge Castle which had taken on a new military significance under Cromwell’s forces and was doubling as a sort of house of correction for petty offenders.

In 1672 there was an order of release from the King, followed shortly after by a re-arrest and another three years inside. This time it was the Fleet Prison in London. Even in Holcroft’s day, Fleet Prison was a notorious debtor’s prison that didn’t see a vacuum cleaner from one year to the next. As Dickens attributed to the naive Mr. Pickwick, “You don’t mean to say that human beings live down in those wretched dungeons?”

In time he was allowed back to the relative comfort of the austere Cambridge Castle with a friendly gaoler’s nod allowing him out to preach occasionally. Undaunted by his long internment, Francis Holcroft never veered from his strong desire to preach the Gospel in rural areas and lived to witness entire families, father, mother, children, walking fifty miles to hear him preach.

But why imprison a learned academic in the first place? And why the missing name on the plaque? Come to that, why were so many superstitious figures ripped out of the Parish Church windows and the altar rails used to fence in a farmer's hogs?

Chapter II

It's really quite a simple matter to elbow your way through the Parish registers in the Cambridge Public Records office. Occasionally the discovery of an Uncle Walter or Grandma Thompson in the baptisms, marriages and burials raises a pair of glinting eyes which cast around the sea of otherwise blank faces.

The Bassingbourn records rank amongst the finest. Witness the flowery handwriting of John Lawson on old parchment, Vicar in 1626, supposedly until his death in 1660. The Latin inscription of William Scarlett, following on, apparently straight afterwards, carefully avoiding all reference to the four-year stay of the young Clare College Fellow, Francis Holcroft. But a short bike ride to the University Library tells a very different story. We see in the Commonwealth Committee records, Francis Holcroft appointed Minister of the Word upon the "resignation" of John Lawson in 1656. We see the same committee working party paying Bassingbourn a visit in 1650 and describing John Lawson as grown old and weak with a poor delivery. Condemnation indeed from a "government department" determined to infuse the church with powerful Bible teaching.

The practice of papering over people as if they'd never existed was nothing new. Charles the Second led the way with a complete air-brush job on Oliver Cromwell, by arranging for the start of his reign to be back-dated to the day after the execution of his father. Select. Edit. Delete. Very neat and tidy.

Bassingbourn was probably Parliamentarian in sympathy during the Civil War. There remained however, a link with Royalist Ely, where Cromwell, whose mother was first a Bassingbourn widow and kept estates here, lived under the shadow of the Mother Church. He was not averse to marching into the Cathedral with his heavies and turning the entire congregation out onto the pavement when he didn't like the service.

There was little the Bishop could have done about it. Regarded as second only to the recently beheaded Archbishop of Canterbury for his out of favour forms of worship, he himself was banged up in the Tower until the restoration of the Monarchy, years later. Ironically, one name on the long petition "shopping" Matthew Wren for superstitious practices was our own John Lawson. Cambridge itself, remained largely a Royalist haven encircled by a Parliamentarian sea, until the tramping sound of Cromwell's soldiers hit the quiet cloisters, requisitioning assets and ejecting Fellows of the wrong persuasion.

The Puritans had waited 150 years for their time in history. For the chance to purge a lukewarm clergy and bring some Gospel fervour to the common people. To champion democracy in church affairs, free of the dictates of flawed patronage and seemingly disfunctional cathedrals.

Francis Holcroft was a new breed of University Fellow. His time at Clare College heralded the wind of change. He took to preaching to the passers-by from the window of his rooms at what became known as Round Head Corner. His heart burned for those dark corners where the light of Jesus had yet to shine. Small wonder his first stop was Litlington.

Soon he found himself "the people's choice" at Bassingbourn. The theme of one of his sermons here has passed down to us through a small boy at the time.

"My father maid his servant and children to goo with him to the meeting thow it much displeasd us and Mr.Holcroft preached from them words "the ston that was regectid by yow builders is becom the head ston of the corner". And I being yong did not understand. I also remember that my father and mother cam hom in the morning and as soonne as my mother had doon milleking shee cam in and toold my father that she must goo to Basingbon again, and they toock their hors and weent away."

Chapter III

On May 12th, 1660, splendid in scarlet, the Vice-Chancellor led members of the University from the Schools to the cross on Market Hill. The town waited, going ahead with "lowd musick" to proclaim the restoration of King Charles II. They played a great while from the top of King's College Chapel. Then, from the same commanding heights, a detachment of redcoats fired a volley of musket shots into the air. If Charles had kept his promise at the declaration of Breda, Francis Holcroft might have gone on riding gently between his rooms over Clare gatehouse and the church at Bassingbourn.

"We do declare a liberty to tender consciences," ran the decree, "and that no man shall be disquieted or called into question for differences of opinion that do not disturb the peace of the kingdom." It was merely a stalling tactic. The following year the body of Cromwell was exhumed from Westminster Abbey, hanged, beheaded and exhibited in pieces from the ramparts of Parliament. The National Vow and Covenant was publicly burnt by the common hangman. On St. Bartholomew's Day, 1662, 1,800 clergy were driven from the Church of England by the Act of Uniformity, unable through their "tender consciences" to affirm unfeigned assent to all its pretexts.

Many ousted clergy swelled the growing ranks of separatists. Daniel Defoe, writing of the subsequent persecution, asserted that some 8,000 men, women and children perished before the Toleration Act of 1687, which gave nonconformists permission to conduct their own meetings. Francis Holcroft left Bassingbourn in 1660, after being ejected from his college. His faithful congregation, having travelled far and wide to hear him preach, received him in their villages instead. Eversden became a focal point, where the congregation continued to meet for prayer and bible reading long after he was imprisoned for preaching without a licence. One day I'll make the trip to Oakington. To the railed off enclosure, once "unhallowed ground" outside the old Church wall. To the old graves that stand behind a row of cottages. There lie the remains of Francis Holcroft, in the small plot he purchased for the burial of himself and his friends, the price of nonconformity. He left behind a collection of books, clothes worth £5, his old chestnut nag with bridle and saddle worth £3, and a priceless legacy of vibrant churches. In my mind, I'll stand with the 2,000 people who crowded in to commemorate his life, long afterwards. I'll imagine that hot July afternoon in 1867 and call to mind our crumbling heritage. The reality of neglected chapels, house conversions, dwindling congregations and the sacrifices people made.

His band went with him to his funeral service. Drummers from Cambridge; some said they were scholars. All his latter years he'd had them with him, jibing, barracking, disrupting his meetings and preventing him from preaching. Mr. Milway, Pastor of the Church at Bury, had to raise his voice above their drumming.

Perhaps amongst their number were those who'd ensured Francis Holcroft's earlier arrests. Who tipped off Captain Duckett and his Lieutenant and saw him taken prisoner on the open road under an antiquated charge of not attending church at any time the previous month. Saw him sentenced to abjure the realm or suffer death as a felon, before the earl of Anglesea intervened and secured imprisonment instead. Rooting out dissenters was a profitable occupation in those days. The local constables relied on informers and shared out the heavy fines with them.

A strange scene in the vilest prison in London is said to have hastened the demise. A small man is standing above a large crowd in the frosty courtyard. Morning after morning he stands there, lion-hearted, displaying the same ardour with which he issued forth from his college window, years earlier. Will he never learn? He's undeniably a man of learning, his knowledge of the gospels quite astonishing. And yet he's unmethodical, unprepared, unscripted, like no other. They say there's scarcely a village in Cambridgeshire without some barn he's preached in. He gets so heated with the passion of his words that he stands there, day after day in freezing cold without a coat. He takes a chill and never quite recovers.

Maybe Mr. Milway got above the drummers in the end. Perhaps the faithful drew a little nearer as the lines recorded in the service sheet were read aloud, since few of them could read.

*“Cambridge, Christ lent him for a time to thee,
A pattern for thy preachers he should be.
Look on this copy fairly writ, and mend
Your hands, then Christ your Lord will you commend.
Holcroft of preachers, for faith, for zeal the best,
I'll only say, he's dead and weep the rest.”*