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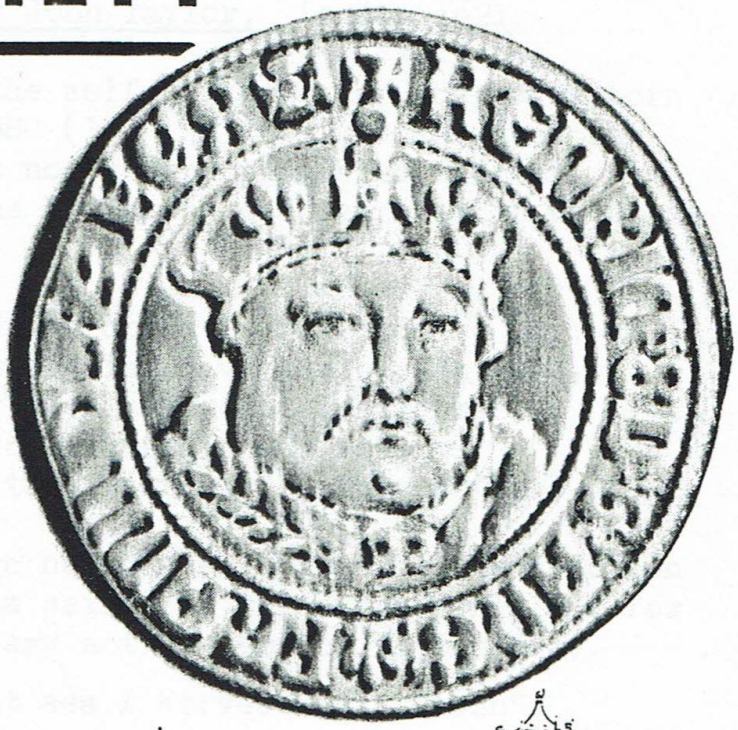

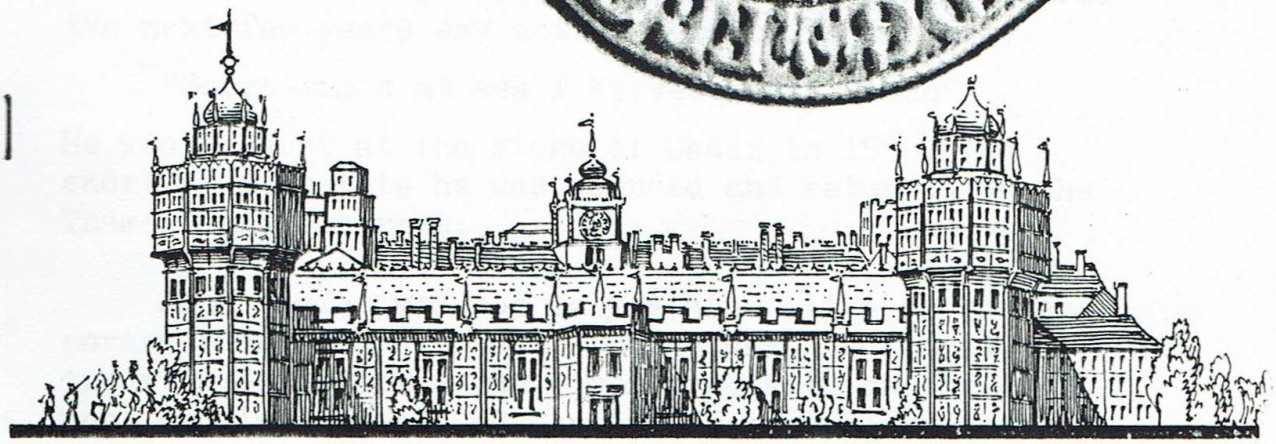

OCCASIONAL PAPER

2. THE UNNATURAL FATHER

NONSUCH ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY

for Epsom, Ewell, Cheam and Banstead

No. 2. Occasional Paper March, 1973.

The Vnnatural Father: Or the cruel Murther Committed by one Iohn Rowse of the Towne of Ewell, ten miles from London, in the County of Surry. Upon two of his owne Children. By John Taylor, London 1621

John Taylor, the self styled Water Poet, was born in Gloucester in 1580 (1). He received an education locally, but he was not a very promising scholar. In fact, he says in the Epilogue to a pamphlet of nonsense poems:-

"You that in Greek or Latin learned are ...
... Here I am English have employed my pen,
To be read by the learnedest Englishmen,
Wherein the scholar plain may see,
I understand their tongues as they do me." (2)

At an early age he became apprenticed to a London waterman, but he was seized by the press gang, and for the next few years saw active service in the Navy.

"Seven times at sea I served Eliza Queen".

He was present at the siege of Cadiz in 1596, and shortly after this he was wounded and returned to the Thames as a Waterman.

John Taylor was not only a journalist of contemporary events, and a poet, but he was also an adventurer, and performed many journeys, both on the Continent and in England. Probably his most famous exploit was to sail down the Thames in a boat made of brown

paper, which he describes in "The Praise of Hempseed"(3). His verse, which enjoyed widespread popularity in his own day, is now much neglected and generally considered to be of a very low order. However, it does have a racy vitality in its rhyming couplets, which act as an efficient vehicle for his broad sense of humour. Although many of his anecdotes are somewhat bawdy, much of his writing reveals an underlying thread of piety, as is well exemplified by the following lines when he is describing a storm he experienced at sea:-

"But leaving jesting, thanks to God I give, T'was
through His mercy we did 'scape and live,
And though these things with mirth I do express,
Yet still I think on God with thankfulness." (4)

This religious theme is evident throughout "the Vnnatural Father".

His works cover an immense range: from books of jokes and anecdotes to satirical religious pamphlets; from descriptions of his journeys and lists of the Taverns in London to factual accounts of current events. His main value to the Historian, however, is his topographical references, and the description of the world he saw around him - not from an objective but from a subjective point of view, for he wrote an eye-witness account of contemporary events and their effect on himself and the people round about him. His writings give a very vivid picture of the lives and personality of the ordinary people in England in the first half of the seventeenth century.

After a long and eventful life he died in 1653 and was buried in the old church of St. Martin in the Fields. He composed his own epitaph:-

"Here lies the Water Poet, Honest John,
Who rowed in streams of Helicon,
Where having rocks and dangers passed,
He at the haven of Heaven arrived at last."

In writing this brief survey of the Water Poet's

life and works, I can only echo the sentiments expressed by him in the epilogue to "The Great Eater of Kent" (5):-

"Thus having ended I have scarce begun,
For I have written but a taste in this,
To show my readers where and what he is."

"The Vnnatural Father" is a well written and printed pamphlet, and is certainly a long way above the general standard of topical pamphlets circulating at the time. The following summary is based on the 1621 edition.

****

"All my inditements are my horried crimes,
Whose story will affright succeeding times".

"As a chaine consists of divers linkes, and every linke depends and is inyoak'd upon one another: Even so our sinnes, being the Chaine wherewith Satan doth bind and manacle us, are so knit, twisted, and sodered together, that without our firme faith ascending and Gods grace descending, wee can never be freed from those infernall fetters ....."

"For a lamentable example of the Divels malice, and mans misery, this party, of whom I treat at this time, was a wretch, not to be matched, a fellow not to be fellowed, & one that scarce hath an equally, for matchlesse misery, and unnatural Murther (Murder) ..."

John Rowse, who was a fishmonger in London, gave up his trade and came to live in Ewell, "neere Nonesuch in the county of Surry, ten miles from London", where he owned a small plot of land, and lived an honest life, much respected by the people living in the surrounding villages. He married and lived very happily until he hired a servant by the name of Jane Blundell who quickly became his mistress. This led to many arguments between him and his wife, who eventually died of a broken heart. He soon married again, but retained the maidservant, which again led to much strife between him and his wife, "so that by his dayly Ryot, ex-

cessive drinking, & unproportionable spending, his estate began to be much impoverished, much of his Land morgag'd and forfeited, himselfe above two hundred pounds indebted and in the processe of time to be, of all his honest neighbours reiected and contemned."

In order to escape his creditors he fled to London with his maidservant "where he fell in league with a corrupted friend", who tricked him out of all his money and lands. John Taylor does not give the name of this friend, as it was John Rowse's last wish that he should not be named in any book or ballad. Instead he hints at it in a cryptogram. He then fled first to Ireland, and then to Holland, where "pondering his miserable estate, and ruing his unkindness to his wife, and unnaturall dealing to his children, and thinking with himselfe what course were best to take to helpe himselfe out of so many miseries", returned to London. On arrival he discovered that he had been tricked out of his land, and resolved to return to Ewell, partly from fear of arrest and partly from desperation and partly because his conscience was troubling him.

"The poore Woman received him with joy, and his children with all gladnesse welcomed home the prodigall Father".

He regretted that all he had to offer his children was a life of poverty and he resolved to put an end to this by killing them. Accordingly he sent his wife to London on a frivolous errand, leaving his two children, girls of four and five years of age, asleep in bed.

"Hee, having an excellent Spring of water in the Seller of his house (which, to a goode minde that would have imploy'd it well, would have been a blessing: for the water is of that Christaline purity, and cleernesse, that Queen Elizabeth of famous memory would dayly send for it for her owne use) in which hee purposed to drowne his poore innocent children sleeping." He therefore carried his children one at a time down the steps into the cellar, where he held them beneath the water until

they were drowned. He carried them upstairs and laid them on the bed, but such was his remorse for his action that he made no effort to escape. When his wife returned, he told her that he had sent them to relatives "at a village called Sutton, foure miles from Ewell". She, however, had felt uneasy all day, and went upstairs to find both her children dead on the bed. She called the constable, and John Rowse gave himself up without a struggle. At his examination he confessed freely, "so that he was sent to the common Prison of Surry, cal'd the White Lyon (6), where he remained fourteene or fifteene weekes a wonderfull penitent Prisoner, never, or very seldome, being without a Bible or some other good booke meditating upon; and when anyone did but mention his Children, he would fetch a deep sigh, and weepe, desiring everyone to pray for him: and upon his owne earnest request, he was praide for at Pauls Crosse, and at most of the Churches in London, and at many in the Country".

At the next Sessions held at Croydon, he was condemned to death, having made a full confession of all his crimes, and was hung on the common gallows at Croydon on 2nd June 1621, "where he dyed with great penitency and remorce of Conscience".

John Taylor then gives a very forceful comment on the state of the Clergy in Ewell at the time:-

"I now declare, is most lamentable & remarkable; which is, that Ewell being a Market Towne, not much above ten miles from London, in a Christian Kingdome, ... hath neither Preacher nor Pastor: for although the Parsonage be able to maintaine a sufficient Preacher, yet the living being in a laymans hand, is rented out to another for a great sum, & yet no Preacher is maintained there ..... The Towne is served with a poore old man that is halfe blinde, and by reason of his age can scarcely read: .... for a Sermon amongst them, is as rare as warm weather in December, or ice in July: both of which I have seene in England, though but seldome."

John Taylor, rather characteristically, continues this account with a list of dreadful murders selected from the Bible, the Classics, and British History, and says that there is no parallel with the murder committed by John Rowse. The pamphlet concludes with the prayer of John Rowse for pardon of his wicked life, and his "Arraignment, Confession, Condemnation, and Judgement of himselfe", and it is in the Water Poet's typical rhyming couplets. The two lines quoted at the head of this account come from this section.

There are one or two points arising from this pamphlet which merit discussion. John Taylor had a great weakness for cryptograms and anagrams. One of his favourite tricks was to make a flattering anagram out of the name of the person about whom he was writing (7). This type of trick, together with the rebus or pictorial pun, was much appreciated by the Tudor and Stuart audiences. The one which occurs here, was without doubt obvious to his readers at the time, and is stated as follows:-

"But yet upon a Dye his name may be picked out betwixt a sinke and a trey".

Or, putting it into modern English:- You may see his name upon a dice between a five (cinq) and a three (trois). I would suggest that his friend's name was Carter, (French quatre, i.e. four).

Another point of interest is the location of the cottage. The 1621 edition carries a woodcut on the title page showing a man, who bears a remarkable resemblance to the tradition picture of Guy Fawkes, drowning two small wooden looking children in a stream in the open air. This stream flows beneath a cottage, and may be seen coming out of the cottage through a circular arch. Unfortunately, no conclusions can be drawn from this, as the woodcuts in this type of work were notoriously crude and inaccurate. It is very likely that the artist who cut the block had never been to Ewell in his life. Hindley, in a footnote to his 1873 edition (page 8) voices the opinion that it stood on the site of the Spring Hotel. Judging by the tone and wording of the footnote, he certainly had an

enjoyable stay at the Spring Hotel. His praise for the establishment is very John Taylor-like, for when the Water Poet went on his travels he relied on free hospitality from the Inns and the local people wherever he happened to be. He usually got it, for people either thought it was a good advertisement to receive praise in his books, or else they were afraid of the scathing comments that would appear about them in print. Although John Taylor vehemently denies it in one of his books, it was a very efficient system of extortion. However, Hindley does not offer any reasons for choosing the Spring Hotel as the site of John Rowse's cottage.

Cloudesley Willis, in his History of Ewell (8), states that the site of the cottage is still pointed out, and it has been rebuilt, and also tells of another accident which took place at the cottage. Unfortunately, he omits to say where tradition places it. I have heard it stated that the cottage was in Church Street, but I rather doubt this, for the land rises from the Spring to Church Street, and in order for the father to drown his children by holding them under the water, then the water table must be as high as the floor of the cellar. It would have been impossible to have held them under had the water level been more than a few feet below the top of a well.

John Taylor makes two more references to Ewell, one in his "Description of the Two Famous rivers of the Thames and The Isis" (9) -

> "From Ewell towne the river Brent makes haste,
> who by the Thames is lovingly embraced."

He places the confluence of the Brent between Molesey and Twickenham, which applies to the Hogsmill but not to the River Brent, which joins the North bank of the Thames at Brentford. I have never come across a reference to the Hogsmill under the name of Brent, and it is not clear as to whether he is confusing the names of two rivers.

In his catalogue of taverns in 10 Shires about London(10) he states that "At Ewell(there are)two, Katherine

Umbrevile and Francis Kendall, but one may serve that town, and doth, as I think, which is the sign of the Popinjay." (Presumably derived from the Lumley arms)..

It is of interest that a very similar murder took place in Ewell in 1850. Charles Dickens, in his Household Narrative (11) for April, describes how Thomas Denny was tried for the murder of his child. He was an exceedingly poor labourer who lived in the hay loft belonging to his master. His wife had a child which died immediately. An investigation followed which led to the father being tried for murder. The prisoner's seven year old son testified as to how his father had killed the child with an awl. The man was sentenced to death, but was afterwards reprieved. It appears that his motives were very similar to the ones which prompted John Rowse, for the prisoner appeared grief stricken, and very penitent for what he had done.

In conclusion, a list of the principal editions of "The Vnnatural Father" is appended:-

1) "The Vnnatural Father ..." -I.T. (John Taylor), London 1621. Small quarto. Not listed under John Taylor in British Museum Catalogue. This edition is listed under Rowse. B.M. c27c33.

2) "All the Works of John Taylor ..." J.B(eale) for James Boler. London 1630. Folio. B.M. 79h22. ("The Vnnatural Father" starts on page 135.)

3) "The Natural History and Antiquities of Surrey" Aubrey, 1719. Octavo. Page 227. B.M.290p27-31. Transcribed into the English of his period, and omitting the end. It is described as being taken from the 1630 folio, which leads Cloudesley Willis in his book to state that the murder took place in 1630.

4) "The Old Book Collector's Miscellany", Vol.3. Hindley 1873. Octavo. B.M. 2324g8. A transcription of the 1621 pamphlet. All references to this work given in this present article occur in Volume 3.

5) "The workes of John Taylor" Hindley 1872. Quarto. B.M. 2288g3. This contains transcriptions of several of his works, and in particular the 1621 pamphlet.

6) Edwards, J. "Companion from London to Brightelmston" Dorking. Issued as a series of parts, 1789 - 1801. Quarto. Minet Library. This has an almost complete transaription of the first part of the pamphlet, under "Ewell". This fascinating book will be considered in greater detail in a later article.

Notes

1) Hindley, in the introduction to "The Works of John Taylor" 1872, gives an account of the life of John Taylor. R.J. Mitchell and M.D.R. Leys, in "A History of London Life" (Pelican edition 1963, p.147 et seq.) have an interesting chapter on John Taylor's London, with special reference to the life and works of the Water Poet.

2) "Sir Gregory Nonsence, His News from No place". London 1622. Octavo. B.M. c117a6. 2nd edition 1700. See also Hindley, 1873.

3) London 1620. Quarto. M.B. c30d25. See also 1630 edition.

4) "A Very Merry Wherry Ferry Voyage". London 1622. Reprinted in Hindley's 1873 edition.

5) London 1630. Quarto. B.M. c31c9. See also Hindley 1873 edition.

6) For an account of the White Lyon Prison see Manning and Bray Vol. III appendix iii, xi.

7) He occasionally used the name RØLIHAYTON, an anagram of IOHN TAYLOR. Also in one of the poems (by Gualtevus Stonehousus) in the front of "Museum Tradescantianum", 1656, an anagram for John Tradescant, the gardener and collector, is given as "Cannot hide arts".

See "The Tradescants" Mea Allen 1964, p.190-191, 249.

8) "A Short History of Ewell and Nonsuch". C.S.Willis 1948 edition, page 99.

9) London 1632. Octavo. B.M. c30b36. Re-printed by the Spencer Society, 1870, B.M. 9490/5.

10) "Catalogue of Taverns on Ten Shires about London" London 1636. Duodecimo. B.M. c30b37. See Spencer Society re-print, Vol.4. 1877.

11) "Household Narrative" - a monthly supplement to "Household Words", April 1850, p.79.

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