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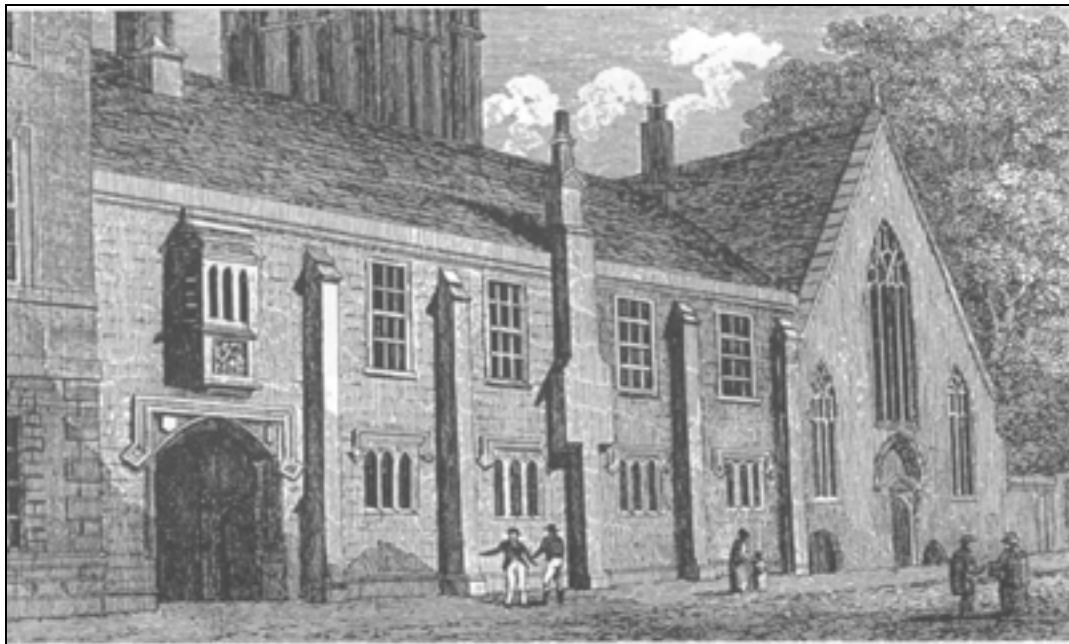
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~ JOHN BIDDLE ~ The father of English Unitarianism

By Walter Hawkins

Gloucester had seen a steady growth in trade throughout the early period of the seventeenth century with less destitution among the poor, and an increase of skilled workmen. All this came to a violent halt when the nation became divided between supporters of the King and supporters of Parliament. Generally, the countryside with its gentry was royalist, whilst in the towns a large number - though by no means all - of the citizens were supporters of Parliament. Charles I had several successes initially when he brought his army to the west of England, and had in fact taken Exeter and Bristol, So it was with trepidation in 1643 that Gloucester awaited the Royalists, who had a large, experienced army, whilst the city had few defenders, little in the way of ammunition and walls which had been neglected. Had Charles chosen to invade immediately there is little doubt that he would have been successful, but he chose to lay siege instead. The result was that he never managed to capture Gloucester; its garrison held on until an army, under the Earl of Essex, left London and relieved the city.

Supporters of the King within the city, for example in the established church, doubtless being in a minority, would have offered no outward resistance to the city's stand and others would have already fled. The Puritans were in control, but they were by no means of one opinion only. Add to this mixture those who had very radical beliefs, classifiable roughly as Quakers, Anabaptists and a few Presbyterians with a 'liberal Christian' outlook, and it may be imagined that there was a considerable ferment of religious thought, even in a small city like Gloucester. One thing is certain, nobody was apathetic about their beliefs. Into this little world in 1641 had come one John Biddle as *Master of the Free Crypte School* attached to St Mary-de-Crypt Church in Southgate Street. This was a school of long standing, founded in 1539 for the teaching of poor scholars.



Grammar School at St Mary de Crypt in early 19c.
with acknowledgements to Gloucester County Libraries

John was born in Wotton-under-Edge in 1615, the son of a clothier tradesman who died when John was a young boy, leaving him to be brought up by his widowed mother. Fortunately there was a local grammar school for which he obtained a scholarship that enabled him to receive the basics of a classical education. At school he showed that he had high intelligence, and he is credited with a translation of Virgil's *Bucolics* and of the first two *Satires* of Juvenal(1). These works and others from his school period were afterwards printed in London, with

approbation of some learned men(2). His *signs of genius* attracted the attention of the lord of Berkeley Castle. From then on Lord Berkeley helped him with an exhibition scholarship of £10 a year, which must have made life easier for him and his mother. There is little more information about his schooldays, but the fact that his learning ability survived the rigours of school and home life shows that he must have had a tough streak in his character. Life cannot have been easy for poor people in a village, so it is somewhat astonishing that T Floyd, writing in 1760(3), had this to say of him: *having manifested in that station a singular piety and contempt of secular affairs, he was sent to Oxford in 1634*. At Oxford, Biddle was a student at Magdalen Hall until he graduated with a Master's degree in 1641. Upon strong recommendation from his university tutors, he was accepted by the Mayor and Council of Gloucester as Master of the free Crypte School displacing another 'freethinker' from the office.

It seems that in spite of Puritan zealots being in control of the city (not least the city MP, Thomas Pury, who became prominent in the Long Parliament for his strong views) there were also a number of 'preachers' such as Robert Hart, a Mr Vaughan from Hereford and a Robert Bacon from Bristol. The latter was said to have gained many adherents to his 'antinomian' doctrines, which included a belief that the moral law is not binding on Christians. These views, it appeared, were too strong for local people, and in 1644 Bacon was expelled from the city.

St Mary-de-Crypt Church was one of the surviving medieval churches in the city. It was within a short distance of both the east and south walls of the city. Thus, after a couple of peaceful years in office, John Biddle found himself living at one of the key points for the defenders when Charles I laid siege in 1643. In charge for Parliament, Colonel Massey quickly organised all the citizens to patch the neglected walls, continue work on the new defences built from 1642 and to man them so as to resist the Royalists; he chose the church adjacent to Biddle's school to house the armoury and gunpowder. The city was bombarded by cannon, especially from Gaudy Green, less than a quarter of a mile from St Mary's.

Surprisingly, within the city there were few casualties, and churches, including St Mary's, were not seriously damaged. It was the 10th of August 1643, when the siege began in earnest, although for months previously there had been skirmishes. The main army of the King surrounded Gloucester and the siege continued until the 5th September 1643, when overnight the attackers departed, leaving the city still in the hands of the Parliamentarians.

So at last, Biddle was able to properly re-establish his school in its normal rooms but his tenure was not to continue for long. In 1644 he drafted what he called *Twelve Arguments against the Doctrine of The Trinity* (4). These can be summed up as a belief in one God, with an emphatic rejection of the Holy Spirit as equal to God - this was not a complete rejection of the Holy Spirit, only his conviction that there was no other person equal to God. This applied equally to Christ, though only if he was accorded equality with God evidently Biddle thought Christ would rank above the Holy Spirit in relationship to God.

This was a terrific bombshell to drop into the middle of a highly religious community who not only believed fervently in the Trinity but had greatly enhanced perception that God (meaning the Trinity) had saved them from destruction during the siege. In witness of this, when they rebuilt the Southgate they placed an inscription on the outside reading *A City Assaulted by Man but Saved by God*. And on the inside was a reminder to *Ever Remember the Fifth of September 1643, Give God the Glory*.

At first Biddle tried to be circumspect and only showed his tract to his friends, as he must have realised that the atmosphere was highly charged and not very conducive to new ideas. Especially would this have been so whilst the bishopric and deanery organisations existed in the city. Although the Commons had passed the Sequestration Act early in 1643, the Bishop of Gloucester was not deprived of his see until 1646, and it was even later before they could sort out the cathedral income, because the Dean had the books with him in royalist Oxford. Biddle wanted his friends' opinions about his views but one 'false friend', as it was put, reported him to the Magistrates. It was believed to have been the usher of the church to which his school was attached who betrayed him, the Rev J Corbett, but there was no way of proving this.

Biddle had continued his study of the scriptures, and knew the New Testament by heart, in both English and Greek, except for the last few chapters. His friends were aware of his brilliance, but this did not help him when he was reported to the magistrate as a heretic for his views on the Trinity. He replied with a confession of his faith, which they would not accept, and he was pressed to rewrite it. He did so, and this time they reluctantly accepted it and released him. He returned to his duties, but by the 23rd October 1645 he had again discussed his views, now much more firmly held, which consequently led to his dismissal from his Mastership. The Usher, a Master Allen, was promoted in his place.

A much more serious outcome was to follow (5). Biddle had to appear again before the Magistrates and was committed to the Common Gaol, to *be detained till a fit occasion of presenting him before Parliament in London to be punished as they should decree*. However, an influential friend stood bond and he was released - for the time being. Six months later he was summoned to appear at Westminster and was committed to prison. He was still there on the 1st, April 1647 when he wrote a letter to his friend of college days, Sir Harry Vane, appealing for him to intervene to secure his release. In it he wrote a defence upon distinctly Unitarian grounds, even if it was couched in the religious language of his day. He wrote: *God is jealous of his honour and will not give it to another. We therefore, as beloved children, should imitate our Heavenly Father, never depart from his express command and not give the Worship of the Supreme Lord to him the Scriptures nowhere affirm to be God.*

Vane, not surprisingly, was unsuccessful in trying to help him and he was still incarcerated when, in 1648, he had printed *A Confession of Faith concerning the Holy Trinity and the Testimonies of some of the Fathers*(6). The Puritan Divines replied by drawing up the notorious Draconic Ordinance of 2nd May 1648 against Errors, Heresies & Blasphemies, such as professed by Biddle, which were to be made punishable by death, but it was not passed by Parliament.

In spite of the efforts of Vane and others, Biddle remained under restraint of an Officer of the House for the next three years. It was not a severe confinement, for his case was often referred to the Divines, where he argued his case in vain.

After the beheading of Charles I Cromwell urged the repeal of all the laws affecting religion. Biddle was released and went to Staffordshire, where a Justice of the Peace befriended him, making him his own chaplain and appointing him to be a Preacher in the county. Not for long, however, for the President of the Council recalled him and he was strictly confined and not released until 1651. Then Parliament passed an Act of Indemnity, so that Biddle and others were set at liberty.

Lloyd states that *Biddie's writings, his persecutions and sufferings made him many friends in London, some meeting Sundays with him, when he expounded and discoursed on the Scriptures*. This may be looked upon as the first Unitarian congregation in England, and is why Biddle has been styled the *Father of English Unitarianism*. As he first began to make his opinions known in the City of Gloucester, Lloyd ventures to call this *the birthplace of English Unitarianism*.

By now Biddle had become acquainted with the writings of the Italian theologians Laelius Socinus and his nephew Faustus Socinus, though he did not accept the Socinian view that the Holy Spirit is only a divine power. Whilst Biddle sets forth various errors, he still believes in a sort of Trinity, though not an equal deity of three persons.

Biddle reached the peak of his influence in 1654 when he wrote a short tract entitled *A Twofold Catechism*, one subtitle being a *Scripture Catechism* and the other *Brief Scripture for Children*(7). His supplementary description is somewhat caustic: *Composed for their sakes that would fain be mere Christians and, not of this or that sect, inasmuch as all have, more or less, departed from the simplicity and truth of Scripture. By John Biddle, Master of Arts, of the University of Oxford.*

This little tract had a tremendous impact. Parliament ordered it to be burnt by the Common Hangman. Biddle and his printers were summoned before the House of Commons, and once more he was committed to prison. The Commons ordered Dr Owen, Vice Chancellor of Oxford, to answer him, which he did in a book(8). (It is amusing that Lloyd comments that 'Owen answered this little book, which a man might put in his waistcoat pocket, by an enormous volume of about 700 pages'). Dr Owen's book includes this ominous warning: *the evil is at the door, there is not a citty, a towne, scarce a village in England wherein some of this poison is not poured forth*. He was of course responding to a man he considered to be a dreadful heretic.

Another episode in Biddie's remarkable life now took place. Again, as in 1648, the Divines demanded that he be hanged, but Cromwell - a man with an odd mixture of morality and opportunism - was afraid that a precedent would be set, and some of his army leaders might be similarly treated. So he banished Biddle to the Scilly Isles, where he remained for three years, with a pension, surprisingly, of one hundred crowns a year. Under the General Act passed in 1651 Biddle was released yet again and returned to the mainland.

Regarding Dr Owen's comments about the spread of poison nation-wide it is interesting to note that in 1654, a James Forbes became 'Cromwell's man' in Gloucester Cathedral. He was to hold Unitarian beliefs, though not identical to Biddie's.

Biddle was now considered tainted by Socinian ideas, but the only comment Forbes made on the situation was

There are a few Socinians here who keep to themselves. After the Reformation Forbes was to suffer similar persecution to Biddle but he survived to settle finally in Gloucester in 1662, a fateful year for Biddle. Forbes built the Barton Unitarian Chapel in 1699, which remained in use until it was demolished in 1968. (When the chapel was demolished a problem arose over the remains of James Forbes, but it was solved by the acceptance of the then Dean that, as a church dignitary, he was entitled to be buried in the Cathedral Cloisters, where his ashes are now reinterred, with a suitable tablet to mark the place.)

To complete the picture of continuity of Unitarian witness in the city, there was an apparent gap from when Biddle was forced to leave until James Forbes came in 1654. It is fairly obvious, however, that friends of Biddle were still to be found, for in 1647 the Rev John Cooper became the Master of the Crypte School, where he stayed for five years before becoming the minister of Cheltenham parish church in 1652, which position he held until he was ejected in 1660. Cooper was much influenced by Biddle's views, which he made known from time to time, and even took a collection of a few pounds in 1662 to help an exiled Polish Socinian living in Oxford.

Biddle then, was not a lone prophet, but an inspirer of others. Since supporters lacked a leader for short periods only it is reasonable to claim continuity for the congregation from Biddle's time in 1644 through to the present day. However, we must return to the story of John Biddle's short life, now nearing its end. The Divines in Parliament had given way to new persecutors after Cromwell died, and not long afterwards came the Restoration. Biddle had been in the country for a while, and then returned to London, where he gathered some followers, who met in his house for Sunday worship. They were soon arrested, in June 1662, and Biddle as leader was fined £200 which he was unable to pay. He was therefore committed to Newgate Gaol as a debtor. Under the dreadful conditions there he caught gaol fever and died on the 22nd of September 1662 at the age of only 47 and was buried in the cemetery near 'Old Bethlem' in Moorfields(9). (But now he has no known grave).

Such was the fate of this Christian scholar, who but twenty years earlier had been received with such commendation from his Oxford college. He was no agitator or controversialist, and rarely responded to those who condemned him. He felt that truth in itself was plain and simple, and that replies and rejoinders served no purpose. He lived through the time of the second and greater revolution (the first being the Protestant Reformation). This second one was the Puritan Reformation, in which the Presbyterians were busy constructing a new creed, but also creating a new ecclesiastical tyranny, it was the Independents, Quakers and others who pioneered civil and religious liberty. Civil war and religious ferment reigned, but John Biddle sat quietly, *treading a path overgrown with error and sophistry, searching to find truth, in which no Englishman had gone before him for many years.* He gave birth to a revolution whose reverberations are still felt some 350 years later; yet today, though once renowned, there is no tablet or record in Gloucester. John Biddle may justly be termed Gloucester's forgotten famous son.

Appendix

Biddle's Writings

Apart from in his youth when he did extensive translations of varied Greek poetry and prose into English verse, Biddle concentrated his writings into five small tracts published at intervals between 1644 and his death in 1662.

The first tract of 1644

The Twelve Arguments, drawn out of the Scriptures, against the doctrine of the Trinity' were as follows:

1. He that is distinguished from God, is not God. The Holy Spirit is distinguished (in the Doctrine of the Trinity) ergo this is false.
2. He that gave the 'Holy Spirit' to the Israelites, to instruct them, is Jehovah, who is God.
3. The Holy Spirit speaketh not of Himself, ergo it is not God.
4. He that heareth from another what he shall speak is not God, ergo The Holy Spirit does so.
5. He that receiveth of another is not God, ergo the Holy Spirit does so, and so is not God.
6. He that is sent by another is not God The Holy Spirit is sent, so is not God.
7. He that is the gift of God is not God. The Holy Spirit is the gift of God.
8. He that changeth place is not God. The Holy Spirit changeth place.
9. He that prayeth unto Christ to come to judgment is not God. The Holy Spirit does so.
10. He in whom men have not believed, and yet have been disciples and believers, is not God. Men have not believed in The Holy Spirit, and yet have been so, ergo.
11. He that hath understanding distinct from that of God is not God. The Holy Spirit hath a will distinct, ergo.
12. He that have a will distinct in number from that of God. The Holy Spirit has so, ergo.

Bibliography and References

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IRANEAS, JUSTIN MARTYR, et al. Testimonies, 1648: GC (in favour of Biddle's heresy)

A SOCIETY of GENTLEMEN. *The Biographical Magazine*, 1776, 4 vols: GC (Archbishop Usher passing through Gloucester 'had conference with Biddle (and) endeavoured to convince him he was in error', but without effect.)

ATKIN, John. *General Biography*. 1799-1815 .10 vols. GC

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5. LLOYD. ref 2.
6. NEAL. *History of the Puritans*.
7. LLOYD. ref 2.
8. OWEN. *Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated*.
9. CHALMERS, A. *General Biographical Dictionary*. 1812-17 32 vols. GC

Author Walter Hawkins is Chairman of Gloucester Unitarians.

Russell Howes writes:-

I have come across John Biddle in my delving through documents of the period relating to Gloucester and the following excerpts from official records may be of interest. (The first two are in the Gloucestershire Record Office, the last in the Public Record Office).

Gloucester City Sessions, Sessions Book (GRO GBR G3/S04):

John Biddle, schoolmaster of Christ school, to be secured, that some course may be taken concerning him and his dangerous opinions. Easter 1644.

Gloucester City Sessions, Order Book (GRO GBR G3/S02):

Mr John Biddle, schoolmaster of Crypt school, has declared himself to hold dangerous opinions; to be removed, and not to teach any longer. 23rd October 1645.

The Journal of the House of Commons:

Sir Waiter Strickland to make report concerning one Biddle, who has written a treatise against the divinity of the Holy Ghost. 26th May 1647.

The house, being acquainted with a blasphemouse pamphlet, Twelve arguments touching the deity of the Holy Spirit, by John Biddle, ordered all copies to be seized, and the sheriffs of London and Middlesex to have them publicly burnt by the common hangman in Cheapside and New Palace Yard, Westminster; the committee for plundered ministers was to examine John Biddle, and have him committed if they saw cause, and to examine the printer or printers if they could be found. 6th September 1647.

The committee for plundered ministers was to examine Biddle, who printed his book, and if he refused answer to commit him to prison; and they were to appoint divines to confer with him to remove him from his opinions. 8th September 1647.

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