

Village Echoes

The spectacular model of the Houses of Parliament recently floated on the pond in Goudhurst as part of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations prompted queries as to why this particular building, and not Buckingham Palace, was chosen. One theory suggested it was because Goudhurst was a Puritan parish during the period of the English Civil War in the 17th century.

The history of Goudhurst just before and during that period shows that on 6th October 1638 Edward Bright, a Puritan preacher, was appointed curate of Goudhurst. His stay was not a long one as, along with other Puritan ministers in the area, he fell foul of the then Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, for "not reading the prayer against the Scots" and was suspended from office in September 1640. This action came about from the fact that in 1637 Charles 1, in an attempt to impose some religious conformity across the country, had tried and failed to introduce a new prayer book in Scotland. This ultimately resulted in a war with Scotland and indirectly led to the start of the English Civil War in 1642 when Charles was forced to recall Parliament in an attempt to raise money to fund the army. Opposition to the monarchy in Kent was linked to religious dissent and it was particularly strong in towns such as Cranbrook and in the surrounding Wealden parishes, including Goudhurst.

Bright's replacement in Goudhurst was James Wilcock, who was appointed vicar in 1641. Not much is known about Wilcock except that, in the same year, he published, in book form, the text of six sermons he had preached in St Mary's. It is interesting to note that, evidently with a view to arousing reader curiosity, the title page states – with some relish - that the sermons had been "most maliciously charged with the titles of odious, popish, blasphemous and superstitious preaching". The "malicious" charges had probably been made by Edward Bright, whose views do seem to have been favoured by the local people of Goudhurst, since they actually petitioned Parliament that Bright, whom the petition described as "an orthodox minister of Godly life and Conversation", be allowed to be their "Lecturer" and to preach in Goudhurst every Wednesday (on other days he attended to the needs of parishioners in Cranbrook and Brenchley). The petition was granted and, in May 1642, Bright returned to Goudhurst while Wilcock was forced to leave the parish. Bright remained as Vicar of Goudhurst until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, when Wilcock reclaimed the position once again.

Thus we can reasonably conclude that, during the 1640s and 1650s, the inhabitants of Goudhurst were more supportive of the Commonwealth than of the exiled monarch.

Returning to the original question, why was it that a model of the Houses of Parliament was recently seen in Goudhurst? The simple answer is that a model was also floated on the pond at the time of the Queen's coronation in 1953. Thus in 2012 Goudhurst celebrated not only the Diamond Jubilee but also the skill of the builders of the original model sixty years earlier.

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