

**... faith is a journey not an arrival ... (1)**

Nicholas Breakspear (also spelt Brekespear and Brakespear) is, as yet, Britain's only Pope, ruling under the name of Pope Adrian the Fourth from 1154-1159 as the Vatican's 170th incumbent. His father, Robert Breakspear, had been a priest in the diocese of Bath before moving to the monastery of St Albans in Hertfordshire. The future Pope is believed to have been born nearby at Abbots Langley and was educated at the Abbey School in St Albans (now St Albans School). From there, he moved to France to become a monk, an abbot, then cardinal bishop of Albano near Rome, and the papal representative to Scandinavia.

A second Robert Brakspear, a descendant of the same family, formed W.H.Brakspear and Sons Brewery in Henley, Oxfordshire in 1779 after a period as landlord of a coaching inn in Witney. In a quirk of fate, when the Henley Brewery was closed for re-development in 2002, a new site was found back at Wychwood Brewery in Witney for the re-establishment of the historic Brakspear brewing tradition.

Pope Adrian IV used the symbol of a bee on his mitre - the tall tapering headdress worn by senior churchmen - as a reminder of the 'B' at the start of his original surname; and a bee remains as the main element of the brewery's logo and on their beer labels.

In 1830 the new rector at St. Mary's reported that attendance at the many non-conformist chapels - Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists (both Primitive and Wesleyan), and Quakers - was four times that at the parish church. The Methodists' attendance alone was up to 600, whilst evening congregations at the Congregationalist church was around 200; and the population of Witney at the time was only around 2500. You do the maths!

As far back as the 1520s, Witney was a close-knit group of families actively promoting the scriptures in English, and questioning aspects of Roman Catholic doctrine. Even then, there was a strong link with the cloth industry. By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Witney was a marked Puritan town, seemingly centred on the families of clothiers and fullers, and well-known names such as Early, Smith and Marriott. However, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century saw a dramatic rise in Wesleyan Methodism. John Wesley preached often in and around Witney, being profoundly impressed by the 'plainness and artlessness' of the congregation, but also by a prevailing 'spirit of seriousness' which he believed was 'a pattern for all England'. (1)

John Wesley was an Anglican cleric, '... an High Churchman, the son of an High Churchman ...'. educated at Christ Church Oxford, later becoming a fellow of Lincoln College. He 'remained utterly loyal to the Church of England', and '... did everything to ensure that Methodists attended their parish church, especially for the Eucharist,' insisting that they were full members of the Church of England. Indeed closing a three day meeting in Bristol on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> August 1756, he wrote, 'My brother (Charles) and I closed the conference by a solemn declaration of our purpose never to separate from the Church ...'. (2) It was not in 1844, 53 years after John's death, that the Methodists and Anglicans parted company.

On Monday 16<sup>th</sup> January 1764, having preached to '... a numerous and serious congregation ...' at five in the morning at High Wycombe, he 'took horse' en-route for Witney. Around noon, he

arrived at Ensham Ferry, 'The water was like a sea on both sides ... being ten to twelve feet deep.' In mid-stream his mare, '... lost both her forefeet ... However, after one or two more plunges, we got through, and came safe to Whitney.' (1)

The first Methodists met in a weaving shop, but in 1801 a new chapel was built in the High Street. By 1850 it was too small and the present chapel was opened. The Primitive Methodist church in Corn Street became first a laundry and is now a sandwich bar and barbers.

On Wednesday 30 October 1771, Wesley's Journal records, 'I preached at South Lye. Here it was that I preached my first sermon, six-and-forty years ago,' (1) where he served as curate from 1725.

There were many Quaker families who built their first meeting house called 'Old Housing' in Wood Green, in 1677 in the parish of Hailey.

The old Congregational chapel in Meeting House Lane, is now the scout hall, and the Congregationalist chapel on the High Street, was demolished in the 1950s.

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the parish church of St. Mary's was, as Bishop Wilberforce commented, 'in a deplorable state' (2), the rector, Revd. Charles Jerram, suggested a new church was needed at Wood Green, as he felt St. Mary's was rather a long walk for folk. Holy Trinity was opened in 1849.

The Roman Catholics regained importance during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1915 they met at No.1 Church Green once a month for Mass celebrated by the visiting priest from Summertown. In 1933 they took over and adapted the old Anglican school in West End; services were conducted by the priest from Eynsham, until 1948 when they appointed their first priest. Then in 1975 the Church of Our Lady and Saint Hugh was dedicated.

Howard Brayton

(1) John Wesley's Journal

(2) The New Book of Witney 2007 Charles & Joan Gott