

SLIMBRIDGE AND AN AMERICAN CONNECTION

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On June 30th 1996 a new window in the North wall of the chancel and adjacent to the altar of St. John the Evangelist Church in Slimbridge was dedicated in memory of Lawrence Bridger who was Rector 1577 – 1630. The Dean of Chapel and choir of Magdalen College, Oxford, took part in the service. The window, which incorporates the Bridger coat of arms ('ar, a chevron engraved, sa, between three crabs, gu.') was made possible by the generosity of American descendants, several of whom attended the ceremony.

The purpose of this note is to give the historical background to the event and to identify some possible reasons for the original emigration of the Bridgers to the New World. Most of the material used is from the church records, Bishop's Transcripts and Bridger family wills transcribed by members of the Slimbridge Local History Society but with some material abstracted from American sources listed in the bibliography.

The involvement of Magdalen College reflects an association with Slimbridge Church which goes back to the time of Henry VII who gave Magdalen the advowson of Slimbridge, i.e. the right to nominate the rector, with the condition that the rector paid £10 pa to the College (a custom which has only recently been put in suspense)



The Bridger Coat of Arms in the Memorial Window light in Slimbridge Church

LAWRENCE BRIDGER

What we know of Lawrence Bridger's background comes largely from a research note by Elmer Oris Parker. He was born in 1550 at Godalming and entered Oxford in 1568 where he was, unusually, elected a fellow of Magdalen College before receiving his B.A. in 1570, and then an M.A. in 1577. He was recommended to the office of Rector and Clerk of Slimbridge by the President of Magdalen with the approval of the Bishop of Gloucester. Again somewhat unusually, maybe uniquely, he was invested with the office by Queen Elizabeth at Windsor Castle on 11th Oct. 1577. In 1586 Lawrence was installed as a Prebender of the 3rd stall at Gloucester Cathedral, a post which he held until resigning in 1625. Of his secular activities we learn most from the thirteen references to Bridgers in Vol 3 of 'The Berkeley Manuscripts', written by Lawrence's contemporary John Smyth (1567 – 1640) Steward to the Berkeleys. For example, Smyth (V3 p203) sold Gossington Hall to Lawrence Bridger, clerke parson of Slimbridge, with 60 acres of land. There were also several other substantial sales to Lawrence by Smyth who also records that Lawrence Bridger, Parson of Slimbridge, clerke, was one of 'the persons charged to finde horses for

the trayned band under Sir Gabriell Lowe, Knight, and Captaine of Dragoons of Berkeley Hundred in Anno 1626'. In what is a rather nice epitaph Smyth says that Lawrence died 'a very rich and honest man'.

Lawrence married twice but died in 1630 a widower. In his will he makes bequests to nine children, Samuel, Lawrence, Joseph, Benjamin, Arthur, Elizabeth, Faith, Mary, and Anne with Samuel being the eldest son by his first wife and Joseph the eldest by his second wife, neither wife having so far been identified. From the 61 entries in the combined church records and Bishops' Transcripts and seven transcribed Bridger wills it has been possible to construct with some confidence if not total assurance a Slimbridge family tree which terminates in 1730 with four deaths in the remaining family. However for the purpose of this note we need next to consider only son Samuel.

SAMUEL BRIDGER

Samuel was born in 1584 and at age 18 he matriculated at Magdalen College. He was Auditor to the Dean and Chapter (or College) of Gloucester Cathedral, a lay post. To correct an impression of American writers, it is worth noting that the College is the body corporate of clerics and is unconnected with education. Samuel died whilst resident in Gloucester and was buried in the Lady Chapel of the Cathedral with a rather clever epitaph;

Here lyes the body of Samuel Bridger, gent, who
Departed this life upon the 21st day of July, An.1650.
Receiver of this College Rents, he paid
His Debt to Nature, and beneath he's laid,
To rest until his Summons to remove,
At the last Audit, to the Choir above.

Having crawled over the floor of the Lady Chapel I can reveal that, contrary to American reports, the epitaph is not there. It was removed during a restoration at the end of the 19th century.

We currently have few details of Samuel's life which encompassed the Civil War. His father bequeathed him several parcels of land but not the majority which went to Joseph the eldest son of Lawrence's second wife with severe strictures on Samuel against going to law to appeal against this decision. Smyth was acquainted with him and sold him land, and we can learn and deduce a great deal from his lengthy and complex will. He left his dear and loving wife Mary the benefit of all his 'householdstuff and plate' and 'that part of my dwelling house wherein I myself lately lived at Woodmancott in the parish of Dursley', later referred to as the Dower house.

He makes other bequests to Mary 'for the enlargement of her maintenance for the better education and placing abroad of my children' with another injunction to 'at her own charge carefully bring up my children, such as be not yet disposed abroad, in the fear of God and in good learning' Eight children are mentioned in the will; John and Samuel who had clearly attained their majority, daughters Martha and Mary who if over twenty one were unmarried and, in descending order of age, Joseph, James George and Jonathon. Mary his wife and executrix was to recover substantial monies from 'cosen William Newce of Much Haddam in Hertfordshire' and distribute it between the two daughters and the four under age sons.

To John the eldest son he bequeathed the Auditors office at the Cathedral. John also received the manor or farm of Woodmancote and its lands, and all of the other sons received parcels of tenanted property in the surrounding parishes, notably Slimbridge.

At least in part, 'sending abroad' was interpreted as sending overseas and very soon Joseph, and later at least James, set sail to the New World. The story now switches to Virginia, with the information mainly drawn from American sources.

JOSEPH BRIDGER OF VIRGINIA

Joseph was brought to Virginia in 1652 by Colonel Nathaniel Bacon with whom he later served as a 'Councillor of State in Virginia to King Charles II '. He soon became one of the most prominent men in the Isle of Wight county, Virginia, carrying out major land deals involving many thousands of acres and building a seventeen roomed brick house, 'Whitemarsh', on his estate. He was a member of the House of Burgesses from the Isle of Wight in the 1657-58 session and also in 1663.

He served during (another) Bacon's rebellion in 1676 under the Royalist Governor Sir William Berkeley (1606-1677) of the Gloucester Berkeley family (small world !). This was the losing side and he was denounced as one of the 'wicked and pernicious councillors against the Commonality in these our cruel commotions'. However when King Charles sent over commissioners to report on Governor Berkeley's rule, Joseph was described as a very resolute gentleman who after fleeing with Governor Berkeley was 'active and instrumental' in restoring order. He was a member of the Governor's Court in 1677 and was a witness to his will. In 1680 he was commissioned to raise men to protect the frontiers against Indians and commanded some of the troops.

Excavations at Whitemarsh have recently revealed a wine bottle seal bearing a strong resemblance to the Bridger coat of arms. Earlier his gravestone had been unearthed with a lengthy epitaph from which is abstracted the following:-

'Sacred To The Memory of
The Honorable Joseph Bridger, Esq., Councillor of
State in Virginia to King Charles ye 2nd
Dying April ye 15; A. D. 1686; Aged 58 years
Mournfully leaving his wife, three sons and four daughters

To Charles his counsels did such honour bring
His own express fetched him to attend the King
--etc -----'.

Parker believes that Joseph was one of the Royalists in the Gloucestershire area who helped Charles's remarkable escape to France after the battle of Worcester but no evidence of this is apparent despite the very detailed accounts of the event. He married the well connected Hester Pitt and their children were named Martha, Mary, Elizabeth, Hester, Samuel, William and Joseph with obvious echoes of their aunts and uncles back in Dursley. In his will he makes a bequest to his mother Mary, still living in Dursley 36 years after her husband's death.

SUBSEQUENT AMERICAN GENERATIONS

There is no record of Joseph's brother James's career and family but Joseph's recorded grandchildren total at least 20 and it is therefore of little surprise that it is claimed that Lawrence the Slimbridge Rector has now some 4,000 descendants in America, some of whom have formed Bridger groups and have regular reunions. Descendants still visit the church at Slimbridge to, as they say, 'feel the atmosphere of their heritage'.

WHY THE EMIGRATION?

With most of the facts relating to the Bridger family established it is a natural question to ask if, aside from the general seventeenth century economic pressures of population and food supply, there are any specific factors why Samuel was keen to send his sons abroad. The main reason is probably most apparent from Joseph's epitaph. He was an ardent Royalist and almost certainly so was his family. No evidence of their involvement in the Civil War has been found but the connections with Oxford, a centre of Royalist support, were strong. Lawrence's successor as Slimbridge Rector, Nicholas Richardson another Magdalen Fellow, was taken to Gloucester gaol and vigorously interrogated by the Parliamentarians on suspicion of communicating with Prince Rupert. He died immediately on returning to the Slimbridge Rectory, which with the church was then garrisoned by the Roundheads. It is of passing interest that the site was visited by Col. Massey the commander of the Gloucester garrison who challenged one of the pioneers to try and hit the weather cock on the church spire with a shot from his musket. He succeeded and Massey gave him half a crown.

What is evident from the records of the 1650s is that known Royalists were being harshly treated and their wealth confiscated. Better then to send your children abroad to seek their fortune. No evidence has been found to support Parker's view that Joseph was involved in contriving the remarkable escape through the West country of King Charles II after his defeat at the battle of Worcester in 1650. However this defeat would certainly have diminished any expectation of an early return of the monarchy.

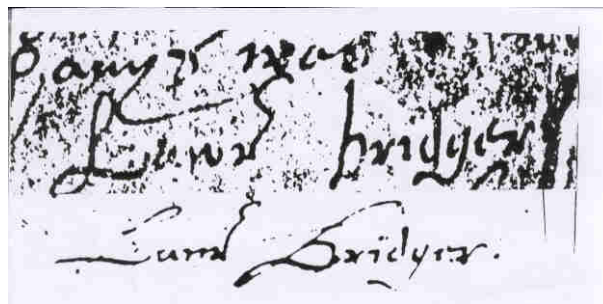
WHY AMERICA?

It would certainly have been known to the Bridgers that access to Virginia had been opened during the previous 30 years and moreover detailed information would have come from two very local sources. The first was from John Smyth, well known to the Bridgers, who was one of the founders of the Berkeley Company, established in 1618 to transport emigrants to Virginia (Gethyn-Jones, 1982). The company's ventures were lead by George Thorpe of Wanswell near Berkeley and most of the emigrants came from Gloucestershire. Unfortunately many were killed in the 1622 Indian massacre and only fourteen members of the company's 1619 and 1622 expeditions survived. The company survived until the 1630s, with the remaining immigrants being absorbed into the thriving Virginian population.

The second would be from an even closer source. The identity of Samuel's wife had long been a mystery. Based upon 'Cosen William Newce', who was referred to in Samuel's will, Parker has deduced that she was likely to have been Mary Newce whose brother was the father of 'cosen' William - cousin being the term used for nephew. Mary's father was Thomas Newce who shortly after her marriage to Samuel Bridger sailed c.1618 for Virginia with settlers of the Virginia Company of London. He was made a Councillor of State in 1621, a post also to be occupied some forty years later by his grandson Joseph. He was one of the survivors of the Indian Massacre and records show that he and his wife were extremely generous in sharing their possessions to save other survivors from starvation. He died in 1623, but his exploits would certainly have been known back in England from the son who had travelled out with him and also survived.

Whilst these two links provided information about Virginia were not exactly encouraging, by 1650 the situation in Virginia had rapidly improved and the knowledge and interest generated by the contacts must surely have influenced Samuel and then a fortune seeking Joseph who now presumably had the means from his fathers estate to establish himself. On a silver mace commemorating the names of the influential first settlers in Virginia, illustrated in Gethyn – Jones's book, the names Newce and Thorpe can be found adjacent to each other. Another interesting Newce family connection is that the mother of Mary Newce Bridger was Anne Seymour, daughter of Sir Thomas Seymour and Jane Berkeley. Since the Berkeleys had owned Woodmancote manor it seems entirely plausible that the manor came to Samuel by the dowry of his wife.

For now, that completes the story. Most is derived from available records but inevitably there are some deductions. With time new information will probably emerge to enlarge the data base and challenge the deductions but that is both the pleasure and challenge of Local History studies



The signatures of Lawrence and Samuel Bridger from early 17th Century documents

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