

This is the nineteenth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

HENRY AINSWORTH AND THE MAYFLOWER

This follows on from my previous article on Henry Ainsworth.

When Francis Johnson was still in prison in London he had married Thomasine, a rich widow who liked to be fashionably dressed. His brother, George, was envious of her wealth and took it upon himself to write to her to tell her that the fine clothing and jewellery that she had worn in her first marriage were not fitting for the wife of an imprisoned minister. Francis was furious, and matters did not improve when he and George joined Ainsworth in Amsterdam. In fact Francis ended up by excommunicating George, who responded by writing an extraordinary book in which he referred to Thomasine as a “bouncing girl”, proud and vain.

In it he painted a vivid picture of what it was that had caught his attention, particularly tightly laced bodices, and, especially, exposed white breasts, “wearing of the long white brest after the fashion of yong dames and so low she wore it, as the world call them kodpeece brests.” He also attacked her whalebone petticoats, great sleeves, excessive lace, gold rings, and an immodest and ‘toyish’ hat. Poor Ainsworth tried to mediate, but he was browbeaten by Francis.

In 1607 Ainsworth both married a widow called Marjory, and published the first of his many books. Not long afterwards, a new group of Nonconformist Separatists arrived in Amsterdam, from Scrooby near Gainsborough; they would later form the core of the Pilgrim Fathers who founded the Plymouth Colony in America. Although they shortly moved further south to Leiden, they kept in touch with Ainsworth.

By 1610, even Ainsworth’s patience had become exhausted by Francis Johnson’s domineering ways and they quarrelled about the fact that Johnson and the elders wanted to manage the group without consulting the congregation. The upshot was that Ainsworth led a small breakaway group, which included a printer called Giles Thorp.

Ainsworth’s Book of Psalms

It was in 1612 that Thorp published Ainsworth’s best known work, a translation from the original Hebrew of the Book of Psalms, complete with the music to which they were to be sung. Some of you may have seen photographs of the Cambridge University copy of this book in the recent exhibition.

Now, the Leiden group adopted this Psalter and when, in 1620, some of them sailed for America they took copies of it with them. They left Leiden in the *Speedwell*, but she began to take on water and they eventually had to squeeze into the *Mayflower* with other Pilgrims from London. I have recently come across the strange story of one copy of the book which went across on the *Mayflower*, but came straight back to England.

It belonged to a tailor called Isaac Allerton, who was a member of the Leiden group, and would shortly become Deputy Governor of the colony. His wife Mary gave birth to a child on board the *Mayflower*, just before the pilgrims landed. Sadly, the child did not survive and Mary died a few weeks later. However, Allerton must have been very grateful to Giles Heale, the ship’s surgeon, for he presented him with a copy of Ainsworth’s Psalter. This fact is noted inside the book, but the place was stated to be Virginia (because New England did not exist at the time). When the *Mayflower* sailed for England the next spring, Heale took the book with him and, when he arrived in London he gave it to his wife Mary, and she also inscribed her name in it.

Another inscription shows that it belonged to a ‘Da’ Williams in March 1701, but the next that we know about it is when it appeared in the catalogue of a London bookseller some time before 1888. Somebody must have seen the word ‘Virginia’ because it somehow ended up in the Virginia State Library, but it was not recognised as being of interest and it just sat on a shelf until April 1936, when a Mr Bowman realised what it was. It is now one of the library’s most treasured possessions. It is not identical to the Cambridge copy and I am at present trying to get more information from the Virginia Library.