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The Rise and Fall of DANIEL AXTELL

"Berkhamsted, 1622. Danniell, ye sonne of William Axtell, was baptised ye 26th of May."

This extract from an old parish register provides the first reference to a remarkable Berkhamstedian. Son of a local family of some substance and standing—there was an Axtell at Ashridge monastery before its dissolution in 1535—Daniel became one of Cromwell's most stalwart fighters. And because his zeal was fanatical, because he fought for the Parliamentary cause with his voice as well as with the sword, his strange career ended on the scaffold at Tyburn.

Daniel Axtell's early years were spent in Berkhamsted—a town which, for all its links with royalty, had defiantly refused to pay the Ship Money tax of £25. As a youth Axtell was sent to London to be apprenticed to a grocer, leaving the suppressed indignation of his native town for the turbulent atmosphere of the city's crowded streets and taverns. At a time when politics and religion were curiously intermingled to inflame the passions of the people, this impressionable grocer's apprentice came completely under the spell of the preachers and politicians. With their fiery words ringing in his ears, he threw up his trade to join the Parliamentarians.

Reputations were made as easily by brawn as by brains, but Axtell had both. His leaders recognised ability and zeal, and promotion rapidly came his way. Captain, major, then lieutenant-colonel of a regiment of foot soldiers at the age of 26, Axtell was prominent in many a spell of hard fighting. He was commended for his part in the siege of Deal Castle, and was ordered to be given £100 by the Committee of Kent. In the midst of an exciting career, he married, but no

mention of his wife and children is made until shortly before his death.

Axtell's ruthlessness and impetuosity were not confined to the military field. He was prominent among those who opposed reconciliation with Charles I, and his indiscretions at the trial of that ill-fated monarch brought about his own execution eleven years afterwards.

A dashing figure in scarlet full-dress uniform, Colonel Axtell was in command of the guard at Westminster

In earlier articles brief references have been made to Daniel Axtell, a Berkhamsted soldier who, after a remarkable career during and after the English Civil War, was hanged at Tyburn as a regicide. This article attempts a fuller account of a man long regarded as the skeleton in Berkhamsted's historical cupboard, Cobb's "History of Berkhamsted" dismissing him in half a dozen lines.

Hall, where, it was alleged, he forced "that cruel and bloody guard" to call out "Execution! Execution!" to drown cries of sympathy for the King.

Between the King's trial and its distant sequel, Axtell saw service in Ireland and became Governor of Kilkenny. There his ruthlessness made him one of the most hated of England's many ill-chosen administrators. Even fellow officers were moved to speak disparagingly of his conduct, and Protestants as well as Catholics were among his victims. In 1656, Axtell resigned his commission and returned to England "to live upon his estates which he acquired in the Service." For a time he resided at Berkhamsted Place, previously the home of that ardent Royalist family, the Murrays.

Taken to the Tower

Without those estates Axtell might have escaped detection. Throughout the dull years of the Protectorate, Royalists patiently awaited the chance of avenging the execution of Charles I, and Axtell, though not strictly a regicide, was a marked man. He managed to evade arrest for a while, but was eventually trapped by a group of Cavaliers who pretended to be negotiating for the purchase of his lands.

Taken to the Tower of London, Axtell must have known he was a doomed man. At first he refused to plead either guilty or not guilty to a charge of "imagining and compassing the King's death," but after a brief harangue he quietly said, "I am not guilty." After challenging some of the jury, he heard counsel for the prosecution paint a dark picture of his activities at the trial of Charles I.

A Notorious
Berkhamsted
Soldier . . .

Many witnesses agreed that Axtell had exceeded his duties as captain of the guard by quelling expressions of sympathy for the King. It was said that he encouraged his soldiers to call out, "Let us have justice against the King!" On the last day of the trial, when the people cried, "God preserve your Majesty!" Axtell ordered his men to demand "Execution!" When a lady in the gallery protested against the trial and called out, "Oliver Cromwell is a traitor!" Axtell lost his temper and ordered the guard to point guns at her.

A Clever Defence

Reports of the trial show that Axtell cleverly parried the charges, but his pleas were repeatedly over-ruled.

The trial was not without amusing interludes. Referring to a charge that he ordered guns to be pointed at a lady in the gallery, Axtell said, "My Lord, to silence a lady, I suppose, is not treason. If a lady will talk impertinently, it is no treason to bid her hold her tongue."

Continuing, Axtell ingenuously said that if he encouraged his soldiers to demand justice and execution, the execution of justice was a glorious thing; justice was one of the attributes of God and the desiring of it would be no crime. The words, not being spoken with a personal application, might have a good as well as a bad construction; and in favour of life, the best sense ought to be put upon them.

To the Lord Chief Baron's testy interjection, "Have you done, sir?" Axtell movingly replied, "I leave the matter to the jury, in whose hands I and my little ones and family are left; I only say this to you—remember your ancestors, remember your posterity. . . . I never heard it said before that words were treason. . . . Gentlemen of the jury, I leave my case, my life, my all, in your hands."

Cheerful to the End

Axtell was found guilty. He left the court "with a cheerful countenance," and even in the condemned cell refused

to be despondent. To his broken-hearted wife, he said, "Not a tear! What hurt have they done me to send me sooner to Heaven?" Replying to a comment upon the dirty state of his cell, he said, "What matter is it to have a little dirty way when we have a fair House to go into?"

Axtell remained cheerful up to the time of his execution. Taking farewell of his friends at the dungeon door, he said, "I am now going to my bed of roses—my last bed. If I had a thousand lives, I would lay them down for the good old cause."

A huge mob who had already witnessed a number of executions at Charing Cross moved on to Tyburn to see the hanging of Daniel Axtell. Once more the expression, "cheerful countenance," was used to describe the soldier as he was placed in the cart, the rope round his neck, ready for the cart to be drawn away and leave him swinging from the gallows. Bible in hand, Axtell gave a dramatic address to the hushed crowd, declaring that the cause he had followed was the cause of the Lord. "I ventured my life freely for it, and now die for it," he said. In a fervent speech on his faith, he said, "I now pray God from the very bottom of my soul to forgive all that have had any hand in my death."

After a prayer and thanks to the sheriff for his "civility," Axtell drew the cap over his eyes, expecting the cart to be drawn away. But no movement was made, the carman declaring he would lose his horse and cart rather than have a hand in the hanging of such a man. The silence of the crowd was broken only by one or two sullen cries of "Hang him!"—a strange contrast to the ribald jeering and jesting that occurred at many executions. Tears streamed down the faces of scores of spectators as the common hangman himself was forced to come down to perform the task the carman had refused.

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