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INTO "YE HOWLING WILDERNESSE"

The American Axtells

I wonder how many readers are aware that a Berkhamsted-born man who was executed at Tyburn nearly 300 years ago is revered by a host of people who bear his name in the United States?

"1622, Daniell, ye sonne of William Axtell, was baptized ye 26th of May," states an entry in the Berkhamsted parish register. This local boy, who was apprenticed to a London grocer, came under the spell of preachers and politicians in the uneasy years which preceded the Civil War. He threw up his trade to shoulder a pike for Cromwell.

Captain, major, then lieutenant-colonel of a regiment of foot soldiers, Daniel Axtell was prominent in many a spell of hard fighting. A dashing figure in scarlet uniform, he was in command of the guard at the trial of Charles I, and, it was alleged, forced "that cruel and bloody guard" to call out "Execution! Execution!" to drown cries of sympathy for the King.

Eleven years later, on the Restoration of the Monarchy, Daniel Axtell was arrested as a regicide and figured in a notable trial to which reference will be made at the end of this article. He was found guilty of "imagining and compassing the King's death," and was hanged.

FAMILY PRIDE

Why does this much-hated and much-admired Berkhamsted soldier, who never crosses the Atlantic, arouse so much interest and respect in the United States? Why have Americans who bear his name formed a nation-wide "Axtell Family Organisation" and published a booklet which shows their President, Silas Blake Axtell, standing near the spot where Daniel Axtell was hanged on October 19, 1660?

First and foremost, there is a family link with the fiery Cromwellian, Daniel

did not go to America, but his brother, Thomas Axtell, was among the Englishmen who, some twenty years after the Pilgrim Fathers, sailed for America and settled in "ye howling wilderness."

"Love of freedom and an insistence on the inalienable right of man to self-government has been a characteristic principle of the Axtell family for many, many hundred years," claims an American booklet entitled "The Axtell Heritage". Members of the family have visited Berkhamsted from time to time, and as long ago as 1879 the then rector, the Rev. J. W. Cobb, was asked to supply information to complete the family tree.

AN AXTELL AT ASHRIDGE

Dipping deeply into English history, they learn that Sir Ralph Axtell, in 1327, was one of the English knights who resisted payment of excessive taxes to the Pope.

Two centuries later, Johannes Axtyl was among the monks of Ashridge at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries. He became a Protestant, married, and lived at Berkhamsted. His name is given as John Axtell in a register which records the baptism of his sons John (1539) and William (1541).

The name Axtell, Axill or Axtoll thereafter appears frequently in local documents. Henry Axtell was a churchwarden in 1624, William Axtell was appointed Town Clerk in 1639, when Berkhamsted was a borough, and another William was a churchwarden in 1720. The register shows that Anne Axtell, "an almshouse woman," was buried in 1734. She was the last member of the family to live in Berkhamsted.

A particularly interesting entry appears in the Borough Council minutes for 1638. Robert Darvill was elected to fill a vacancy as one of the town's chief burgesses (or aldermen) in place of William Axtell, father of the soldier Daniel and the American settler Thomas. Darvill declined to take his oath of admission and was ordered to pay a fine of £5. The bailiff was requested to "take a speedy course to levy the same."

REUNION IN MASSACHUSETTS

Robert Darvill, however, did not stay in Berkhamsted. By the year 1642 he had crossed the Atlantic and was living in the new township of Sudbury (Massachusetts), a founder of which came from Sudbury, Suffolk. Despite his reluctance to take office in his home town of Berkhamsted, Darvill became one of the town officers of Sudbury, Mass., where fellow settlers included Thomas Axtell, son of the Berkhamsted man whose place he had been requested to take on the Berkhamsted Borough Council!

"The Axtell Heritage" states that Elizabeth Axtell, widow of the regicide, sought refuge in South Carolina, and she

left 500 acres to the descendants of Thomas Axtell, of Sudbury.

Successive generations have played notable roles in American history. I quote again: "Some of them stormed Stony Point, some starved and froze through the cold winter at Valley Forge, some fired from behind the rocks and trees at Concord and Bunkers Hill. All voted to create this Union and fought to preserve the Union under Lincoln, and we all will defend it forever as long as we live. While we Axtells in America have never produced a President, we have a record—from Maine to California—of a fair name and solid constructive citizenship."

IN THE REVOLUTION

A member of the family was elected to Congress and was appointed Governor of Utah and then Governor of New Mexico. And in the Revolution, Henry Axtell, a sergeant with General Washington, escaped from the British in New York harbour, fought with Wayne in wars against the Red Indians, and was lost at sea at the age of 39.

Of special interest is the American interpretation of English history. Daniel Axtell, the Parliamentarian, is always the hero. He was, in fact, hated by a vast number of his fellow countrymen. After the Civil War he saw service in Ireland, and as Governor of Kilkenny was so ruthless that fellow officers spoke disparagingly of his conduct. Protestants as well as Roman Catholics were among his victims. He was among the many ill-chosen administrators who poisoned Anglo-Irish relations. In 1656 he resigned his commission and returned to England "to live upon his estates which he acquired in the service." For a time he lived at Berkhamsted Place.

AXTELL'S TRIAL

Then came Axtell's trial. He heard counsel for the prosecution paint a dark picture of his activities at the trial of Charles I, and many witnesses agreed that he had shown undue prejudice as captain of the guard. It was alleged that Axtell ordered the guard to point guns at a woman who called out: "Oliver Cromwell is a traitor!"

"My Lord," he said, "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."

Ingenuously, Axtell maintained that if he encouraged his soldiers to demand justice and execution, the execution of justice was a glorious thing, and the desiring of it would be no crime.

THE SCENE AT TYBURN

Axtell was found guilty. He left the court "with a cheerful countenance," and even in the condemned cell refused to be despondent. To his wife he said: "Not a tear! What hurt have they done me to send me sooner to Heaven?" Taking a last farewell of his friends at the dungeon door, he said: "If I had a thousand lives, I would lay them down for the good old cause."

A huge mob, after witnessing a number of executions at Charing Cross, moved on to Tyburn to see the hanging of Axtell. Bible in hand, he gave a dramatic address to the crowd, ending

EMERGENCY MEDICINE

Local Arrangements

Arrangements for the emergency supply of medicine now operating in Berkhamsted is as follows:—

CHEMISTS' ROTA

The week-day evening (6-7 p.m.) and Sunday morning (11.30 a.m.—1.30 p.m.) service rota adopted by Berkhamsted chemists for the dispensing of medical prescriptions, is as follows for the current month:—

March 1-7: Dickman.
March 8-14: Taylors.
March 15-21: Bonis.
March 22-28: Figg.
March 29-April 4: Dickman.
Good Friday—Taylors.
Easter Monday—Dickman.

LIBRARY OPENING TIMES

The Berkhamsted Branch of the County Library is open in Prince Edward Street on the following days and times:—

Monday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.
Tuesday—10 a.m.—7.30 p.m.
Wednesday—Closed.
Thursday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.
Friday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2 p.m.—7.30 p.m.
Saturday—10 a.m.—1 p.m.; 2.30 p.m.—5 p.m.

LIBRARY—EASTER CLOSING

The Library will be closed all day on Good Friday and on Saturday, 28th March.

(Continued from previous column).

with the words: "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 the carman declared he would lose his horse and cart rather than have a hand in the hanging of such a man. Scores of spectators sobbed as the common hangman himself was forced to come down to perform the task the carman had refused.

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