

## Odd Names in the Registers

**T**HOMAS, ALICE, William, John, Jane, Nicholas . . . these are the first of many thousands of names which appear in the Register of Baptisms of Berkhamsted St. Peter. The earliest entry is dated November 2, 1538, and the list is complete to the present day but for the years of the Civil War and Commonwealth.

Turning over the pages, we find the names of children who were destined to achieve local and even national fame or notoriety. Among the early 17th century entries is the name of Daniel Axtell, a babe in arms who became a Cromwellian officer and was hanged as a regicide in 1660.

Later, among the entries for 1731, we see the first reference to Berkhamsted's most famous son—'December ye 13. Willm ye son of John Cowper DD Rector of this Parish and Anne his Wife was baptised.' The parish clerk increased the size of his script for this entry, no doubt to please the rector, whose signature appears at the foot of this and many neighbouring pages.

### THE COBBLER'S SON

'Mary daughter of Thomas and Lidia Saunders' is a typical entry. Until fairly modern times it was rare to give an address unless one or both of the parents came from another parish. Identical surnames, however, prompted the clerk to state the fathers' occupations in these two entries of 1566:

Willm White ye Glaziers sonne bap.

Richard Whyte ye Coblers sonne bap.

I do not know when the custom of giving a child two, three or more Christian names became widespread among all classes, but early registers have been searched in vain to find a child with more than one name.

Some families were determined to have a child bearing a particular name, usually the father's or mother's. 'Shadrach son of Shadrach and Ann Sear' is an entry which appears in exactly the same form in 1760, 1764 and 1766, indicating that the first and then the second Shadrach died in infancy.

### WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Similarly, we find 'John son of John and Sarah Shakespeare' in entries dated 1759 and 1760. The second John evidently survived, for in 1771 another son with a different name was baptised.

He became Berkhamsted's very own William Shakespeare.

Among William's contemporaries was a boy named Christmas Bird. He was baptised in December, 1769.

Whether Christmas Bird lived to regret his parents' choice of name I cannot say, but he was luckier than a boy who was baptised on April 22, 1632. The entry states: 'What you please the Sonne of William Gill.'

It would be interesting to know what happened at the church when 'What you please' was baptised. Was there a row between mother and father, ending with an angry cry of 'Call him what you please'? If so, the parish clerk took the statement rather too literally! There was no bother two years later, when William Gill's daughter was baptised. She was named Elizabeth.

### THE SCOTTISH SOLDIER

Here are some interesting entries in the original what-you-please spelling:

1681. Thomas Ploockroose born ye 14 day of December a Boute 8 in ye Moring. (The name was more usually spelt Pluckrose).

1690. Porshena the daughter of Mr. Nathaniell Beard and Porshena his wife. (A rare use of 'Mr.'; Nathaniel was evidently an important man.)

1698. John ye Son of William Alke and Mary his wife was baptised, a Scotch Souldier. (Several Scottish soldiers appear to have been stationed here at this time; one was named Murder Mahoy).

1701. James and Elizabete and Hanna Joseph and Sarahe ye souns and Dafress of Thoomass Halle and Deboroye James one yrs ould and Eliz. 8 and Hanna 6 and Josephe 6 and Sarahe 2 and Iseke 9 yerse ould.

1719. Ann the daughter of Richard Smith a Mountybanck and Ann his wife was baptised.

### HALF-BAPTISED!

1719. John the son of John White and Sarah his wife was half baptised. (What is a half-baptism?)

1731. Henery ye son of John Trynott and Martha his wife baptised strangers that Lodged at Mrs. Cokers.

1741. Sarah ye daughter of Charles Cosens of the Parish Tiverton a solger and Johannah his wife baptised. (In the same year the base-born children of two

other solders—of Major Wright's Company—were baptised at Berkhamsted.)

1744. Mary ye daughter of John Thomas and Mary his wife was baptised; he was a solger in Cornol John Princes Ridgment of foot.

1766. Francis son of Frances Williams born at Tring in vagrancy and baptised from the House of Correction in Berkhamsted by order of Thomas Herbert Noyes, justice. (The House of Correction was a prison on the site of the police station.)

1783. Tho. son of Saml. and Temperance Richardson. (Note Temperance as the mother's name; in the same year, and also in 1781, we find Comfort used as a girl's Christian name.)

### FAVOURITE NAMES

In 1788, ten members of the Wood family were baptised on the same day; their ages ranged from 12 to 54 years.

Lack of time precludes a complete study of the rise and fall in the popularity of Christian names. The first of two sample periods is the decade 1670-79. Of the 128 boys baptised in this decade, 34 were named John. Next in popularity were William (26), Thomas (11), Edward (7), Francis (7), and Joseph (6). Four boys were named 'Henery'. We also find the names Reuben, Nathan, Abraham, Barnabas and Job.

Every third girl was named Elizabeth—41 out of a total of 124. Mary (21) was the second most popular name, followed by Anne (13), Sarah (11), Martha (5). Other names were Phoebe, Lydia, Susannah, Jude, Judith, Roberta, Joanna and 'Winnofrith.'

### POPULAR JOHN

For a second sample I chose the years 1740-49. John (44) was again the favourite name, followed by William (34), Thomas (33), Joseph (13), James (13), Daniel (8), Henry (6), Robert (4), and Richard (3).

Of the girls' names, Mary (42), Anne (34) and Sarah (33) ousted Elizabeth (19) from top place in the earlier survey. Then came Susannah (10), Martha (9), Hannah (7), Frances (6), Jane (5). I also noticed Honorette, Henrietta, Barbury (presumably for Barbara), Hester, Fanny, Phoby (spelt that way), Judith, Diana, Avis.

My study of the registers was confined to the years 1538-1840. In this period there were 10,541 baptisms, the average per annum rising from 24 in the reign of Elizabeth I to 62 in early Victorian times.

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