

## A Swainswick Puzzle



Visitors to the beautiful church at Swainswick, near Bath, can see this fine Royal Arms hanging on the South wall over the door. It is described as a “puzzle” in the helpful guide and on the church website because it is the arms of King Charles I and has the date 1647 in which year the King was in captivity having lost the civil war.

King Charles I effectively ceased to rule after he lost the battle of Naseby on 14 June 1645. He surrendered to the Scots in May 1646 and was handed over to the English Parliament on 30 January 1647. He escaped in November 1647 but was recaptured in December 1648. He was then tried and executed on 30 January 1649.

In looking at these dates it is important to remember that until 1752 when Britain changed to the Gregorian Calendar the new year began on Lady Day (Feast of the Annunciation) 25 March not on 1<sup>st</sup> January. So what we call 30 January 1649 was at the time regarded as 30 January 1648.

During these years the Manor House at Swainswick was occupied by William Prynne one of the leading puritan activists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was born in 1600, the son of the farmer who rented the Manor of Swainswick from Oriel College, Oxford. He was educated at Bath Grammar School (King Edward’s) and Oriel College. He became a lawyer, MP and a vigorous and relentless pamphleteer, but remained connected with Swainswick. After his father’s death he took over the Manor and he was Churchwarden of the church from at least 1632. His fierce pamphlets attacking the King and the Bishops led to his imprisonment in the Tower of London in 1633 to 1640 by which time he had inherited the interest in the Swainswick property. He was a strong supporter of Parliament before and during the Civil War and led the prosecution of Archbishop Laud (and so his execution for Catholicism).

However as a strong Presbyterian after the capture of the King in 1646 Prynne became one of those urging, locally and nationally, a deal between King and Parliament in the interests of peace involving abolishing Bishops and replacing them with church rule by presbytery (i.e. local decisions). As a result he was one of those expelled from Parliament in “Prides Purge”

in December 1648 which meant that there became a majority in parliament for the trial and execution of the King. Prynne continued to write vigorous pamphlets and was imprisoned again from 1650 to 1653 this time by the Commonwealth. He then retired to Swainswick and continued writing scathing pamphlets criticising the Government from there. After the Restoration in 1660, which he supported, he was able to return to parliament as MP for Bath and was then highly critical of the hardline “regicides” who had brought about the execution of the King. He died in 1669.

The date on the Royal Arms would normally be expected to be the date they were painted. Prynne’s holding of the Manor of Swainswick in 1647 means he was in effective charge of Swainswick Church, appointing the priest etc. He remained thoroughly against any sort of Popery including Bishops and the divine right of Kings, but wanted a deal with the King for church government on Presbyterian principles to settle the Kingdom after the civil war. They envisaged the King still on the throne as a constitutional monarch, with parliament in charge. This was not an unlikely outcome and the King was apparently willing to discuss it up to a point. After Cromwell’s death Prynne was, as MP for Bath in the “Convention Parliament”, one of those who helped establish the constitutional monarchy under Charles II.

If therefore the date of 1647 is the date the Swainswick Royal Arms were painted they must have been a significant statement, primarily by William Prynne, not only of the fact that King Charles was the monarch, but also that he should remain so in spite of his defeat in the Civil War. It would be entirely in keeping with Prynne’s robust views that it should not have been destroyed even when the King was executed in 1648/49.

It is possible that 1647 is not the date the arms were painted and that they actually date from after the death of Prynne in 1669. But if so it is difficult to see when this most unusual gesture might have been made and why. In any case the painted date of 1647 becomes harder to explain except as a crude error.

My conclusion is that the Swainswick Royal Arms were painted in 1647 as part of William Prynne’s war of words to avoid the trial and execution of King Charles I and promote the introduction of constitutional monarchy and Presbyterian church government. That would make them a most unusual and intriguing survival.

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