John Bunyan
of Bedfordshire

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JOHN BUNYAN

John Bunyan was born near the Elstow boundary at Harrowden in 1628. The Bunyan family had lived in this area for at least 400 years. They were of modest status; John's grandfather was a chapman, who carried small merchandise round the neighbouring villages; and his father Thomas (who married Margaret Bentley) was a brazier, and also toured; for the heavy iron and brass cooking utensils of those days, necessary for cooking over an open fire, often needed repair. Perhaps little John sometimes went with father or grandfather to the humble cottages, the better dwellings of husbandmen, yeoman and craftsmen, and even (a more profitable assignment) to the stately Houghton House on Ampthill hill—its account-books have the entry "paid the brazier". To the impressionable child, this house seemed a palace. In those days before turnpike trusts the roads were often bad; if the Bunyans went as far as Tempsford, where as yet was no bridge, they had some difficulty getting through the low-lying marshy ground south of the village known as the Soul's Slough. In any case, pace was slow, whether on foot or on horse, and there was time to chat with other wayfarers in a fellowship of the road. But at least for a time John went to school to learn to read and write—probably to a dame in the village, who taught the alphabet and the Lord's prayer from a hornbook to the sons of the few who could afford to pay a few pence. In some homes there would have been Bible reading, for the recent authorised version of the Bible, available through printing, was eagerly bought by those who could read at all; and, worded as it was in the language of the day, it came with the freshness and delight of a discovery. But John delighted in his grandfather's chapbooks—ballads, or the story of George on horseback, or Bevis of Southampton.

In what time was spared from helping his father, John, like other active boys, played tipcat on the green, joined in country dances (May festivals and Morris dancing persisted, though frowned on), and went boating on the river at Bedford. Occasionally his father had to attend meetings of the manor court, held in the Moot Hall (or Green house, as it was then called) on Elstow Green in the big room on the upper floor; also in this room at the time of the annual 3-day fair in May any dispute arising at the fair was judged. The fair was a great occasion, though the old cross, which once marked its site, had been at the Reformation reduced to a stump. Six shops in the Moot Hall itself were hired by superior traders; the green was covered with stalls; there were also jugglers, games and plays; and occupants of houses round the green sold beer. Even gentry came from a distance to make purchases; and knaves and rogues were there as well, tempted by the amount of cash that was changing hands. On the other side of the church from the green was Hillersdon House, home of the lord of the manor, Thomas Hillersdon, and newly built by him on the old abbey site; no doubt young John often saw the family at church on Sundays, though in plying his trade he would go to the back entrance.

Things began to change. When John was 13, his grandfather died—the old man, who had not much to leave, left him sixpence. Three years later he lost his mother; and almost at once his father married again. Meanwhile trade was becoming more difficult. Though Thomas Bunyan probably took little note of disputes between king and parliament, and though we do not hear that in Elstow there were the uneasy relations between vicar and congregation that arose in some other villages, yet young John must have heard of strange happenings of distant war; of how Sir Lewis Dyve at nearby Bromham escaped arrest; that Sir William Boteler of Biddenham was a leading man on the parliamentary side; that in 1643 the royalists raided Ampthill. John was no doubt at Elstow fair in 1645 when ill feeling between soldiers and people turned to violence. He would hear of the brief royal incursion later that year, and of fighting on Bedford bridge. At 19 he himself seems to have been called up for service in the parliamentary garrison at

Newport Pagnell. By this time, the fighting was nearly over, and his main work would be in helping to keep the earthworks in repair, though he does say that, by chance substitution of another for himself in some raiding party, he escaped death. Probably his main worry was arrears of pay.

John Bunyan returned to Elstow in his early twenties, having to re-establish himself as a brazier, and anxious to have his own home rather than return to father and stepmother. He married a young girl, of whom little is known but that she too had been taught to read, and that she owned *The Practice of Piety* and *A Plain Man's Pathway to Heaven*, popular Puritan best-sellers. They lived in a small house on the west side of the approach road from Bedford to Elstow; apparently it was at one time thatched, later altered and tiled; and a few years ago it was pulled down. Looking back from middle life on their simple housekeeping, Bunyan says (probably exaggerating) that they had not as much "as a dish or a spoon betwixt us both". They read her books together. Probably the birth of a blind daughter, Mary, moved him to serious reflection. He went to church like anyone else, took pleasure in ringing the bells, and once was rather taken aback by the vicar's sermon on the right use of Sunday—that afternoon he went out to play tipcat as usual, but in the middle of the game suddenly became aware of its triviality and of the need for a deeper purpose. In simple seventeenth century terms, he called this a voice from Heaven. Before long he moved into Bedford to a house (no longer standing) in St. Cuthbert's Street, and at first attended St. Cuthbert's church. Unawares this move to Bedford was to bring him into touch with kindred spirits.

During the civil war, feeling against High Church clergy, especially if of royalist sympathies, had erupted in various places, and Bunyan must have known that Giles Thorne, rector of St. Mary's, Bedford, had been consigned to the Fleet Prison, and that John Gwin, vicar of nearby Cople, was at first in Newgate Prison and later emigrated to Virginia. Under Cromwell, in various places in Bedfordshire some of those men and women who had been reaching out for a simpler form of worship than that in the parish church began to meet in Independent congregations. The first in Bedfordshire was that

in Bedford in 1650. Their pastor was John Gifford (who curiously enough had in the past been a royalist major); and in 1653 Gifford was presented to the vacancy in St. John's church, so that the little congregation met there. One sunny day Bunyan chanced to overhear the conversation of a few women members, and realised that they had found that for which he was seeking. "Methought they spake as if joy did make them speak; they spake with such pleasantness of Scripture language, and with such appearance of grace in all they said, that they were to me as if they had found a new world." They mentioned him to Gifford, now living in the rectory adjoining St. John's church; and Gifford invited him there and had long talks with the young man. The upshot was that John Bunyan joined the Independent congregation. It meant a break with some of his light-hearted companions; he mentions one called Harry, incidentally a loose-liver but a gay fellow, of whom he had been particularly fond. More and more, Bunyan's life merged with that of his new friends. It was the practice of some members to visit like-minded folk in the villages, such as Keysoe and Stevington. Bunyan began to go with them, was pressed by them to speak, and to his surprise found that he had a gift in this direction. "I at first could not believe that God should speak by me to the heart of any man, still counting myself unworthy", but as his hearers rejoiced "that ever God did send me where they were, then I began to conclude it might be so". When Gifford died, he and others were "more particularly called forth". Meanwhile at home his young wife had died, leaving him with four children, and in 1659 he married again—a girl named Elizabeth.

Now a change was to come. So far there had been no obstacle to Bunyan's preaching. But in 1660 Charles II came home. In those days many believed religious uniformity essential for national unity. In this very year, in supposedly free America, a woman Quaker was hanged at Boston. Was an agreed settlement possible? Many Anglicans thought that the developing Independent congregations must be restrained and their members brought within the general framework; and for this it was essential to forbid their preachers, who, though gifted, had seldom much education.

One who thought thus was William Foster, a lawyer, afterwards commissary in the Bedford Archdeaconry. Foster was staying in November with his brother-in-law Francis Wingate at Harlington, a justice of the peace, and heard that the young but well known Bunyan was coming to preach in the hamlet of Samshill. Legislation had not yet been passed, but there was an old act of parliament of Queen Elizabeth's time forbidding conventicles or unauthorised religious gatherings, and this could serve as a threat. Foster and Wingate hoped that a little firmness with a well-meaning but misguided man would restrain Independents and save trouble later. News of their intention had got round, and Bunyan had to decide whether to hold the meeting or not. He walked up and down the field by the farmhouse, reflecting. He felt that he was right; ought he not then to go ahead in faith? He did so; opened the meeting with prayer; and then as he began to speak the constable arrived, arrested him, and took him to Harlington Manor.

Here he had to face another decision. Foster tried to reason with him. "How (said he) can you understand the Scriptures when you know not the original Greek?" Bunyan made people "neglect their calling"; they should work six days and serve God on the seventh. These were only "poor simple ignorant people". To this last Bunyan replied that "the foolish and the ignorant had most need of teaching". "If you will promise to call the people no more together, you shall have your liberty." It must have been hard not to take the opportunity to return home, but he stood firm. His case came before the local justices at the next sessions (then held at the old Swan Inn, Bedford). The chairman was Sir John Kelyng, later a iudge, Kelyng said "We might pray with the spirit and with understanding, and with the common prayerbook also"; Bunyan insisted that prayer came from the heart. He was sentenced to remain in prison until he should conform.

This prison, the old county gaol, stood at the corner of Silver Street and High Street, not ten minutes' walk from his home. Here came the clerk of the peace, Paul Cobbe, to try his persuasions, but in vain. It is said that little Mary regularly brought him soup. To try to support the family, he made "many hundred gross of long tagged laces". Sometimes he

was allowed out by the gaoler, and he kept in close touch with the Independent congregation. They, ejected from St. John's church, continued to meet in each other's houses. In 1670 nearly 30 of them were arrested at the house of John Fenn, and fined. Subsequent distraint to obtain the fines led to uproarious scenes in Bedford, where there was much sympathy for the quiet folk of the Independent congregation.

These years in prison from the age of 32 to 44 must have been wearisome to an active man. The quarters were cramped, and though from time to time like-minded men were imprisoned with him, some of the other inmates must have been less sympathetic. One was the reputed "witch", crazy Elizabeth Pratt of Dunstable, who died there. Bunyan had with him his Bible and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*. He could not help hoping for release; often when the Assize judge came round he tried to get his case reopened, and his wife Elizabeth even succeeded in getting access at the Swan Inn to the judge, Matthew Hale, to plead for him, but in vain. So, unable to preach, Bunyan began to try to express himself on paper. At first his writing was fumbling and discursive, and always it was full of the Biblical quotations which constant study had made part of his own thinking; but gradually, with practice, his style matured; and so he completed his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, in 1666. Probably it was often difficult to sleep, and as he lay awake he would think of the Bedfordshire countryside formerly so familiar to him, of the muddy slough at Tempsford, of the climb up the difficult Ampthill hill to the fine house at the top, of longer journeys to the south when the distant Dunstable downs looked like delectable mountains, and of the travelling folk with whom he had chatted on the roads. As he tossed in uneasy sleep, these old journeys became confused with the chapbook stories of giants and castles read in his boyhood, and also with the spiritual journey he had been trying to explain. And so, on waking, half doubting whether or not to follow a sudden urge to collect all this in words, he began to write: "As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where there was a den, and I laid me down in that place to sleep; and as I slept I dreamed a dream." Once started, the creative urge took hold of him; Christian's

journey, the Slough of Despond, the Evangelist who helped him, the cross (perhaps remembering that at Stevington where he had preached) where Christian lost his burden, Hill Difficulty, the Palace Beautiful, Vanity Fair, Giant Despair, the Delectable Mountains.

At this point in his writing, the outside world began to reclaim attention, and Bunyan's situation looked more hopeful. Charles II, anxious to help the Roman Catholics, bypassed parliament and issued a declaration of indulgence. The Independent congregation, hopeful at last, on 21st December 1671, after prayer and sober conference appointed brother Bunyan to the pastoral office. Bunyan was released. The congregation bought an orchard in Mill Lane, where a barn became their place of meeting. That first year out of prison, when he had to care for family and congregation and rebuild his life, must have made many demands on him, besides the renewal of preaching to distant congregations. (Incidentally, John's long absence from home may help to account for his son Thomas making dubious associates.) Bunyan's position was still insecure. In 1673 Charles II was obliged to withdraw his declaration, and Bunyan was once more at risk—this time under the Conventical Act of 1670, which fined preachers from £20 to £40. In 1675 a warrant was issued against him, but it seems likely that he kept in retirement; the phrase "being driven from you in presence, not in affection" occurs in a book published this year.

One last attempt to suppress Bunyan was made by Foster, now commissary for the Archdeacon. This time the procedure was ecclesiastical. Bunyan had not taken communion at St. Cuthbert's church and so incurred the old church sentence of excommunication. The Bishop, probably instigated by Foster, reported the obdurate excommunicate to the civil authorities, and the sheriff arrested him. So in 1676 Bunyan was "had home to prison again" in the county gaol. In this second term of enforced inactivity, he must have remembered the story he had begun to write and had laid aside, have read it through, and felt the urge to complete it. He had ceased with the words "So I awoke from my dream". Now he wrote "And I slept and dreamed again", and so he finished Christian's journey to the

Celestial City. It was fortunate that there was not much more to write, for in June 1677 two London friends stood surety for him and obtained his release. He hesitated whether or not to print his latest work, which might seem frivolous compared with his more serious ones. Some friends said "John, print it, it might do good"; others said "No"; fortunately the former prevailed. So in December 1677 there was registered at Stationers' Hall a new work by John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and it was published in 1678 at 18d. Its success was immediate. Printed on cheap paper, later illustrated with crude woodcuts, it was bought in thousands by humble folk, and also read by gentry, and constantly reissued. Its appeal was far beyond the Independents—it was recognised as universal. Later, in 1685, Bunyan wrote a sequel, the second part, which deals with Christiana and her children.

He now taught unmolested, in Hertfordshire and in London as well as in Bedfordshire. He continued to write, and issued 60 books in all—the best being *The Life and Death of Mr. Badman*, 1680, perhaps partly drawing on his prison reminiscences; and the *Holy War*, 1682, which looks back to his time as a soldier.

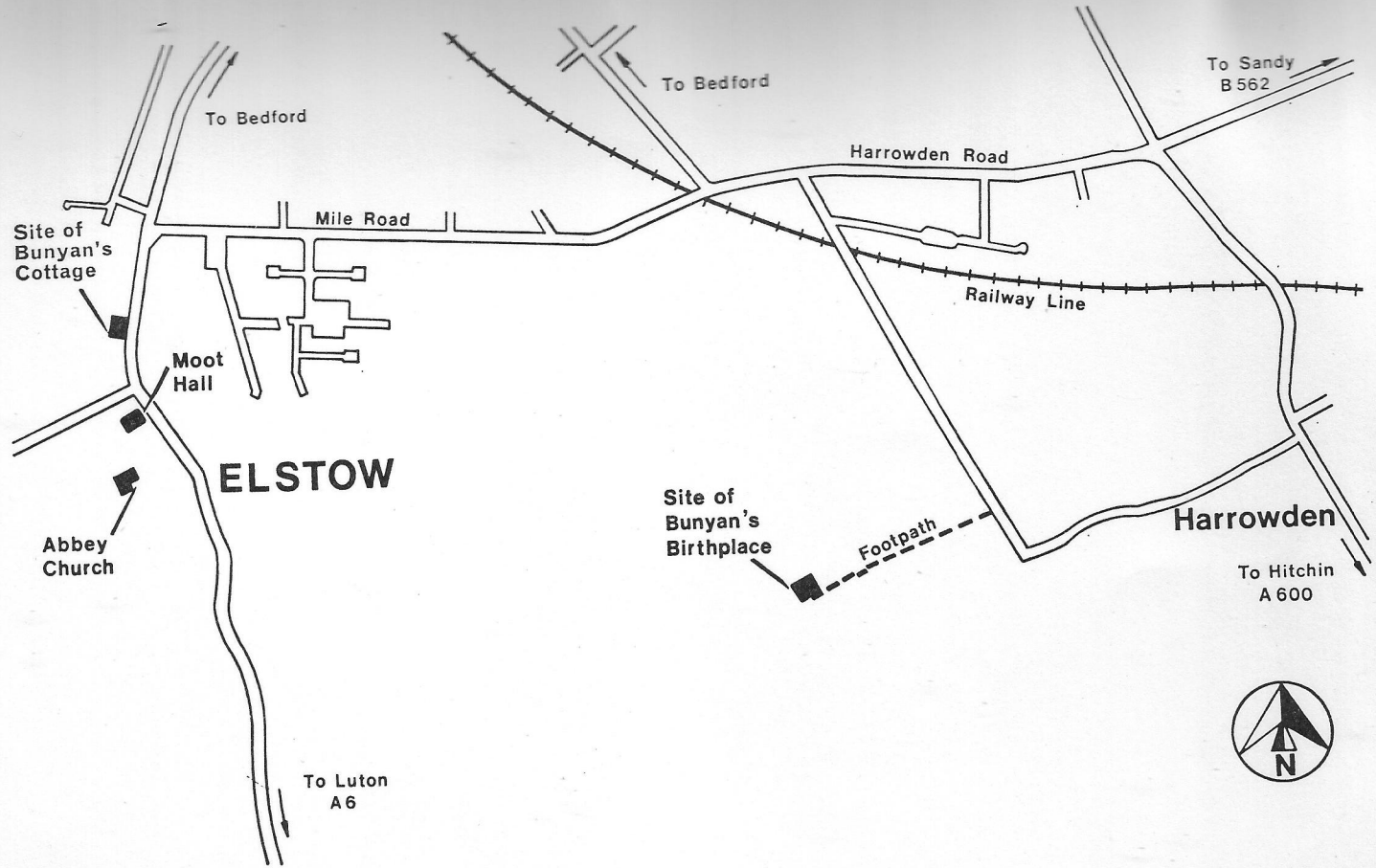
In August 1688, riding to London in the pouring rain, he contracted a severe chill, and after a short illness he died and was buried in Bunhill Fields. In 1685 he had executed a deed of gift to his wife of his possessions, to provide so far as possible for her and their two children in case of further imprisonment; but probably there was little to leave. The Independent congregation in Bedford kept three days in September "in prayer and humiliation for the heavy stroke upon us, the death of dear brother Bunyan". This very year saw the flight and exile of James II. In 1689 there was passed the Toleration Act which gave non-conformist meetinghouses legal status.

What does Bunyan mean to us today? We do not need to be reminded that little or no denominational significance attaches to him. It is true that before 1660 he had a dispute with the Quaker, Edward Burroughs. But in the trend (growing among Independents) towards adult rather than infant baptism, he appears to have resisted those who wanted his

church to take a rigid line, and Bedford Bunyan Meeting still allows its members a free choice in the matter. His main teaching related to the Christian way of life. When on that November evening in 1660 he decided to hold a prayer meeting in spite of warning, he was not actuated by concepts of church and state and of national policy; he simply believed that he was called to give Bible teaching to those who desired it, and that he must do what appeared right, leaving the outcome to God. Had he known it, he was choosing between obscurity like that of Thomas Hayward of Kensworth or Stephen Hawthorn of Stevington, and world significance. For in accepting imprisonment, he was led at first to write didactically, then to write creatively a spiritual allegory which has been read all over the world. New European editions and new translations still appear—the number of languages now exceeds 200. Perhaps in Bunyan's own country it is now read rather by devotional readers and by students of literature than by the general public; but in Africa and Asia the simple story still appeals.

Thus on the one hand Bunyan has stood for that in our national tradition which has impelled individuals to uphold what they believe to be right, regardless of consequences to themselves. He has also for 300 years helped countless readers, latterly all over the world, in that spiritual pilgrimage which, whether or not it is conscious and articulate, we must all make.

The company of Christian writers is vast. Even to list the best would take up much of this booklet; and from differences in taste and temperament it is probable that no two people would make an identical choice. Surely, however, taking the widest viewpoint, the number would include St. Augustine, writer of memoirs; the devotional writers Thomas a Kempis and William Law; the diarists George Fox and John Wesley; and the allegorist John Bunyan.



Bunyan sites in Elstow