

5 KNOWING NOT WHERE HEAVEN'S CHOICE MAY LIGHT GIRDS YET HIS SWORD, AND READY STANDS TO FIGHT

This stone lies close to the Falcon Inn. We know that in Tudor and Stuart times it was at this spot that soldiers were enrolled for military service, and it seems quite likely that this is where Oliver Cromwell raised his first troop of volunteer horse soldiers in the summer of 1642 at the very beginning of the English Civil War.

Oliver Cromwell's achievement was first and foremost a military one. His self-belief, success feeding upon success, made him the most remarkable of many remarkable men who bore arms in the Civil Wars of the 1640s. With no previous military experience, he rose within 24 months from being a captain gathering together a company of volunteers in and around Huntingdon to being the senior cavalry commander on the Parliamentarian side. He fought in the greatest of all the battles of the period, on Marston Moor outside York on 2 July 1644. He, more than anyone else, secured that all-important victory over the King, and he went on to be second-in-command of the New Model Army from 1645 to 1649 and Lord General of the Army from 1650 to 1658. In addition to more than thirty successful engagements in England, Cromwell undertook the most complete (and, some would say, the most ruthless and brutal) conquest of Ireland ever achieved by the British. He then led the most complete conquest of Scotland ever achieved by the English.

He was not a great military innovator. He learnt and applied the methods of fighting common in his day. But he was unequalled in British History in his ability to inspire his men with a belief in the justice of their cause and the certainty of their eventual triumph. By the end of his life, armies sent out in his name were winning the first great victories for British arms on the continent of Europe since the great days of the Black Prince and Henry V, nearly three centuries before. A naval expedition sent to the Caribbean was helping to found the British Empire. Although his expedition failed to capture Hispaniola (the modern-day Dominican Republic) from the Spaniards, it did capture Jamaica.

This couplet is from a poem that captures the problematic nature of that achievement. The unknown poet was in awe of what Cromwell achieved, but he was alarmed by the knowledge that he had overthrown the established order. The lesson of Cromwell's life was that Might is Right. And it troubled him, as it troubles some today.

6 HE NEVER ENTERED BATTLE BUT THROUGH THE PORT OF PRAYER

The area around this standing stone was heavily fortified during the Civil War, quite possibly under Cromwell's guidance, certainly with his knowledge and consent.

The words in this inscription were written in a biography of Cromwell published a few months after his death. The author was Richard Flecknoe who admired Cromwell while being troubled by his legacy. Many of those who knew Cromwell believed him to be a religious hypocrite. His willingness to become Lord Protector, with king-like powers if not a kingly title, convinced many Republicans that his religious exterior was a mask behind which lay a scheming desire to get supreme power. Thus Edmund Ludlow, a fellow M.P. and army officer, wrote that 'you shall scarce speak to Cromwell about anything but he will lay his hand on his breast, elevate his eyes, and call God to record. He will weep, howl and repent, even while he doth smite you under the first rib'. The Venetian ambassador, in a secret report home, wrote that 'Cromwell preached eloquently to his soldiers, urging them to live in accordance with the laws of God, and he often sheds tears, more for the sins of others than his own.'

Flecknoe is not uncritical of Cromwell's willingness to grant a liberty of conscience that resulted in chaos and confusion – 'the people, none talking liberty....but rather following every new-fangled opinion' but he testified to Oliver's integrity and heroic attempt to allow every person to pursue their own truth so that eventually 'as so many pieces of soft wax, they would become again melted and moulded all into one'.

So for Flecknoe, Cromwell took great risks, but he rescued England twice, from the tyranny of Charles I and the anarchy that followed the civil wars. A stern, militarised pragmatism was all that England deserved, and it was what Cromwell, ever seeing God's guidance in prayer, had provided.

7 THE KING CHASTISED US WITH WHIPS, BUT CROMWELL CHASTISETH US WITH SCORPIONS

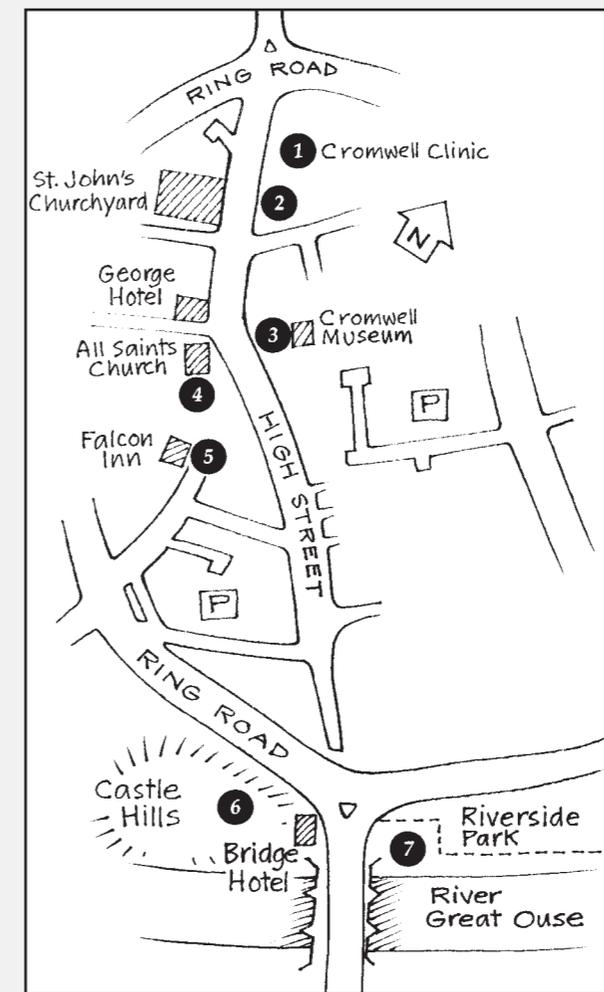
This stone lies close to the old Hartford road along which Cromwell would have travelled in his youth and early adulthood to see his properties in Hartford and to collect his rents. In the 1630s this is the way he would have travelled back to see old friends from his new home in St Ives. During the Civil War, one of the arches on the nearby bridge was removed and a drawbridge installed as part of the town defences.

The quote is taken from a pamphlet entitled 'The Picture of a New Courier Drawn in a Conference Between Mr Timeserver and Mr Plainheart' published in 1656. The author was a puritan radical, John Spittlehouse. He was a member of the Sect known as the Fifth Monarchy Men, who believed – on the basis of predictions in the Bible – that Jesus Christ was about to return to the world to initiate a personal rule over mankind, as a prelude to the Day of Judgement. In 1653 members of this sect believed they had persuaded Cromwell to establish a system of government that would prepare for the Second Coming of Christ. When he abandoned that experiment and agreed to become head of state as Lord Protector, they believed themselves utterly betrayed and they became militant opponents of his regime.

Throughout the Protectorate, Cromwell felt himself under intense pressure not only from those who yearned for a return of the Stuart dynasty, but also from hard-line republicans and puritan sects. He felt constrained at times to adopt emergency powers that allowed him to intern opponents without bringing them to trial; and to raise emergency taxation without parliamentary consent in order to strengthen the security forces. The costs of large garrisons in Ireland and Scotland and the determination to support the international Protestant cause against an aggressive Catholic threat, as he saw it, required him to keep taxation at several times the levels it had been at before the wars.

These are the kind of things that Spittlehouse was referring to when he wrote that 'Cromwell chastiseth us with scorpions.' Cromwell clearly wanted to create a constitutional framework in which there was political as well as religious freedom, but he was not the first or the last statesman to find that the immediate needs of state security forced him into measures that he would have preferred to avoid.

IN PURSUIT OF CROMWELL



The text for this leaflet has kindly been provided by John Morrill, Professor of British and Irish History, University of Cambridge.

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Please note: The Cromwell Clinic is not open to the public.

Contacts:

Huntingdonshire District Council
The Cromwell Museum

01480 388057
01480 375830

IN PURSUIT OF Cromwell

AN INTRIGUING TRAIL OF ENGRAVED STONES

LINKING SITES WITH

CROMWELL CONNECTIONS

THROUGH THE HISTORIC

CENTRE OF HUNTINGDON



IN PURSUIT OF

Cromwell

Around the historic centre of Huntingdon you will find seven inscriptions in Caithness Stone. All the quotations on the stones come from the writings of men who knew Oliver Cromwell personally. Six are set into the pavement, and one, next to Huntingdon's ancient castle mound, is a standing stone. All were carved by Richard Kindersley and were donated by the people of Huntingdonshire and by the Cromwell Association to mark the 400th anniversary of the birth of Huntingdon's most famous son, Oliver Cromwell, on 25 April 1599.



1 A GREAT MAN RISEN FROM A VERY LOW AND AFFLICTED CONDITION

Oliver Cromwell was born within a few feet of this spot on 25 April 1599 in the house which now – very extensively rebuilt – is the Cromwell Clinic.

Oliver Cromwell's father was one of the most prominent townsmen of Huntingdon, having represented the town in the Parliament that met in 1593. Robert was a younger son who had inherited only a minor part of the large fortune accumulated when Henry VIII was confiscating the land of the great medieval monasteries and abbeys. At that time the family name was Williams, but they were related by marriage to Henry VIII's chief minister Thomas Cromwell and they changed their name to Cromwell to please him and perhaps to thank him for helping them to acquire land in this area and around Ramsey, about ten miles to the north of here.

Oliver Cromwell's uncle lived in Hinchingsbrooke House, just outside this town, and there he regularly entertained King James I, other members of the royal family, and many of the great men and women of England, as they journeyed along the Great North Road.

So Oliver's condition at birth was not so very 'low'. But his early adult years were not easy. His father died when he was 18, and he had to learn to run the family properties and find dowries for his seven sisters. He seems to have experienced acute financial problems that caused him around 1630 to sell all his property in and around the town and to become a tenant farmer on a small-holding close to St Ives. There his health deteriorated and he contracted chronic bronchitis and spasmodic malaria, then quite common in fenland England. So the decade before the civil wars broke out in 1642 were times of hardship and affliction.

The words 'a great man risen from a very low and afflicted condition' were written in 1655 by William Sedgwick, a puritan preacher installed in Ely Cathedral between 1644 and 1660 and who was a friend and ally of Cromwell's, although a man given to constantly preaching that the end of the world was nigh. A fellow puritan said of him that 'his heart is better than his head'.

2 TOLERATION WAS HIS MASTERPIECE

This stone is opposite the churchyard of the ancient parish church of St John's Huntingdon. It was in this church that Oliver Cromwell was baptised when he was just a few weeks old in 1599. The church itself was pulled down in the early seventeenth century.

We do not know who wrote these words about Cromwell. They come from an anonymous tract written in 1659, just a few months after his death. Certainly he never spoke about anything with such fervour and apparent sincerity as he spoke about toleration. He came to believe that religious liberty was the greatest of all liberties and the one that God had wished to confer on the English people when he gave the New Model Army victory over the armies of the king.

When he became Lord Protector he never ceased to plead with his Parliaments to extend and protect freedom of religion 'for all species of protestant'. He begged Members of Parliament to consider how they, who had fought against the oppression of the Bishops, could deny anyone else the kind of freedom they had fought for. He rejoiced to know good men with 'the root of the matter in them' in many different churches. This was very remarkable for the seventeenth century when the vast majority of people believed that everyone who was a subject of a particular ruler, or a citizen of a particular state, ought to be a member of the church established by the will of the ruler of the law of the land. More remarkable even than his commitment to allow Protestants to absent themselves from their parish church and attend whatever religious services they wished, was his refusal to make attendance at the state church a qualification for holding public office. Even though a limited toleration was restored to the English people after the Glorious Revolution of 1688, the right to be an M.P. or to serve as a magistrate or to go to an English university was denied to non-Anglicans for another 150 years.

Cromwell placed limitations on those who used their freedom to disrupt the liberty of others and he did believe that some 'heresies' could not be tolerated. And he certainly disliked and distrusted Catholics and placed stricter limits on their freedom. It blemished his outstanding commitment to religious liberty.

3 HIS GREATEST DELIGHT WAS TO READ MEN RATHER THAN BOOKS

In the remains of the medieval hospital close to this spot – in Oliver Cromwell's time the town grammar school and now the Cromwell Museum – Oliver Cromwell was educated.

Cromwell's schoolmaster was Thomas Beard, who was also the author of a number of best-selling books, including The Theatre of God's Judgement, a long series of cautionary tales about how God brought wicked men to wicked ends. Beard was widely read in the classics and in religious works, but little of that seems to have rubbed off onto Oliver. In all the hundreds of letters of his that we possess, and the transcripts of more than thirty of his speeches, he quotes from only one book: the Bible. He knew that inside out and whole stretches of his writing and speeches take the form of meditations on biblical passages, especially from the psalms or passages from the book of Isaiah or from the epistles of St Paul.

He obviously knew whole sections of the Bible off by heart. But otherwise we have no evidence that any of the books he must have read at school or university – or subsequently – stayed with him.

As a judge of people, however, he is generally thought to have been a master. He sought out those 'with the root of the matter' in them, a commitment to promote the puritan way – to put the things of the spirit above the things of the flesh, to be people of integrity and zeal for God. He did not care which particular church they belonged to – he believed that there was truth and confusion in all denominations, but much good in many men and women in all of them.

So when Samuel Carrington published his biography (A History of the Life and Death of His Most Serene Highness) in 1659, this statement that 'his greatest delight was to read men rather than books' was a powerful motto. Carrington had known him from the years before the war and had followed his career at close quarters. So we can take this quotation seriously.

4 SHALL WE NOT MOURN FOR OUR MOSES WHOM THE LORD KNEW FACE TO FACE?

This stone lies just outside the gate to All Saints Church where many of the Cromwell family worshipped and some lay buried. The font in which Oliver was baptised is thought by many to be the one now to be found at the west end of the church, although his own participation in worship here is not recorded.

The quotation on this stone comes from a funeral sermon preached for Oliver Cromwell by Thomas Harrison in Dublin Cathedral in 1658. In it Harrison likened Cromwell to several Biblical heroes, most prominent of all Moses. Moses had led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. According to the Bible, when they came to the Red Sea, the waters parted and the Israelites crossed over in safety. But when the Egyptians, who were pursuing them, tried to cross, the waters closed over them and engulfed them. The Israelites now entered the desert region between Egypt and what is now Israel, and for forty years they quarrelled and squabbled about where to go and where to settle. Only when they learnt to listen to God and to Moses did they finally enter into their 'Promised Land'.

Harrison took this text and applied it to the life of Cromwell. Like Moses, Cromwell had freed the people of God from slavery (under Charles I). He had led them through the Red Sea (the trial and execution of Charles I was seen as the equivalent) and he had led them into the desert. Like Moses before him, Cromwell had found the people wilful and difficult, unwilling to follow him to the Promised Land and, like Moses, Cromwell had died before the journey was complete.

In drawing these parallels, Harrison was following the example of many previous preachers and, more importantly, of Cromwell himself. On four occasions in the 1650s, Cromwell made the same comparison, and he may well have believed that there was indeed a direct and real parallel between the experience of the people of Israel and the people of England in the 1650s AD. He certainly believed that God had used him as His instrument in freeing England from the tyranny of Charles I and of the Bishops. There was now a golden opportunity for a free people to build a new and more just society based on Jesus's teachings and promoting those values throughout the world.