William Tyndale, our most famous son?



William Tyndale 1494 – 1536

Where was he born?

There are no records of the actual date of William Tyndale's birth but it is surmised to be in 1494. Also that he came from a respectably well-to-do family. The Tyndales had lived in Gloucestershire for many generations and a Tyndale family lived at Stinchcombe in Melksham Court. It is here that we can presume that Tyndale was born. The church at North Nibley is thought to be where he was baptised. An Edward Tyndale, probably a brother, lived at Hurts Farm just outside Slimbridge.

The name Hutchins came into the Tyndale family at one point and it may have been adopted by the Tyndales who came from the north as a 'safe name' during the Wars of the Roses. However that may be, there are plenty of Hutchins in the Stinchcombe area today.

Whatever the truth, the Tyndales had a strong relationship to Gloucestershire and to this area. The Tyndales were successful merchants, landowners and people with some local power. Gloucestershire was agricultural and prosperous with large farms and a rich social and cultural life.

Early life

In 1506 he went up to Magdalen College at Oxford and received a formal training in what were called in those days Quadrium and Trivium – 'Quod and Triv' – as they were known. This would have been a course in Grammar, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astronomy. In addition he studied philosophy as it was taught then, natural, moral and metaphysical with Aristotle. Thereafter he returned to Gloucestershire and became tutor to Sir Thomas Walsh at Little Sodbury Manor.

He was a gifted linguist credited with seven languages. Latin was the common language of Church and Officialdom. Tyndale's

Greek was more than excellent and the bedrock of his New Testament skills. He also knew Spanish, German, French. Best of all he had learned Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament. Few, if any, knew Hebrew in England at that time.

The Church

Tyndale was ordained in 1515. In 1521 Cardinal Wolsey attended at St. Paul's Cross, by the cathedral in the heart of London, and with great ceremony presided over a burning of Luther's writings. In the same year the king wrote against Luther for which he was to receive from Pope Leo X the title Defender of the Faith.

His Life's work

Tyndale was of the belief that the scriptures must be made available to the English people in their own language. At this point the Bible was read in church in Latin, so meaning nothing to the average worshipper. Tyndale's single-minded pursuit of his objective determined so much of the remainder of his life. When he found himself in conflict with churchmen in Gloucestershire he decided upon a move to London. In London in 1523 he was approached by a London merchant who had heard him preach and who was obviously impressed by what he heard. Humphrey Monmouth gave Tyndale board and lodging in his house where the young scholar continued his studies 'lyke a good priest, studying bothe nyght and day'.

To Germany

Luther's New Testament came out in September 1522 and by 1524 the Bible could be found in Danish, French, Italian, Spanish (that is Catalan), Czech and Dutch. Luther's Pentateuch, the first vernacular Bible direct from the original Hebrew, appeared in 1523 and his complete Bible, with illustrations by

Lucas Cranach, appeared in 1524.

Tyndale went to Germany in 1524. He settled in Cologne where were to found many printing houses and English business communities, both helpful to Tyndale. He worked with an assistant, a Friar called William Roye, but the Cologne authorities got wind of them and they only just managed to escape arrest and flee to Worms. This was the start of years of pursuit and persecution.

In 1526, in Worms, a small hymn-book sized Bible was printed, probably of three or at most six thousand copies. This was Tyndale's New Testament translation.

At war with the Church

Copies of the New Testament were shipped secretly to England, often in bales of cloth or barrels of grain, and readily snapped up by all who came by them. Booksellers and eager readers in London and the south east seized on this remarkable book. So too, did the authorities. Cardinal Wolsey summoned his bishops and the process of burning these Bibles began. 'Many children of iniquity, maintainers of Luther's sect, blinded through extreme wickedness, wandering away from the truth of the Catholic Faith, have craftily translated our English tongue', he stated. He claimed to have found many mistakes in this translation. Bishop Tunstall ordered copies to be piled up outside St Paul's Cathedral and to he burnt. Only three copies remain of the 1526 Tyndale New Testament.

By late 1529 Tyndale was in Antwerp. From here the following year the first part of his Old Testament translation from the Hebrew began to be taken into England, the five books of the Pentateuch, the only part of the Old Testament to be published in his lifetime.

His Capture and Death

In the spring of 1535 Tyndale was arrested and imprisoned in Vilvoorde Castle near Brussels. He wrote ‘I suffer greatly from a cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh and I ask to be allowed to have a lamp in the evening; it is indeed wearisome sitting alone in the dark’. Tyndale continued in prison his work translating the Old Testament to the last.

Tyndale was led to execution in Vilworde’s square in the autumn of 1536 where two great beams of wood had been placed in a cross. ‘Lord, open the King of England’s eyes’ were his last words. A rope was tightened round his neck, he was strangled and, when judged dead, the Procuror General handed a lighted faggot to the executioner who set fire to brushwood, straw and gunpowder around Tyndale.

References:

- William Tyndale Museum Vilvoorde
- William Tyndale, Gloucester’s Fame and England’s Shame
- The Tyndale Society