

## **Anthony Walker - Doctor of Divinity**

The various clergymen who have served the parish of Fyfield during the last nine-hundred years have caused few ripples on the surface of England's history, but the seventeenth-century rector, Dr Anthony Walker is a distinguished exception. Walker's name is associated with several of the places featured on the Millennium wall hanging in the church and, accordingly, it is fitting to include the following notes about him in this website. A biography is in preparation for those who would know more of the man.

Anthony Walker was born at Connington in Cambridgeshire in 1622, son of William Walker and Susanne, his wife. When Anthony was six, his mother died. Four months later, his father married Marie, daughter of John Bois, Canon of Ely and a member of the committee appointed by King James to translate the Bible.

Following school at Ely, Anthony was admitted to St John's, Cambridge in 1638 where he achieved his MA in 1645. Ordained by Bishop Winniffe of Lincoln in 1644, his first position was as curate to John Gauden, the colourful Dean of Bocking. After three years with the Dean, Walker was appointed household chaplain to the Earl of Warwick at Leeze Priory where he met, for the first time, Mary Rich, Countess of Warwick. Later acclaimed as the most pious of all seventeenth-century ladies, the Countess attributed to Walker, alone, her conversion to a life dedicated to seeking salvation, after a youth spent in the pursuit of pleasure. Their friendship and her spiritual dependence upon him endured until her death in 1678.

Walker's time at Leeze coincided with the troubles leading up to the execution of Charles I, who had recommended him, unsuccessfully, as a Fellow of St John's. Within hours of the execution, a significant fillip was given to the royalist opposition with the publication of the Eikon Basilike, ostensibly the reflections of Charles during his imprisonment. So alarmed was Cromwell's government by its impact, that the poet Milton was commissioned to write a rejoinder, Eikonoclastes. Eikon Basilike had, in fact, been written by Gauden and in the furious controversy about its authorship which raged for decades afterwards, Walker was an important witness because it was he who had carried the work to the publishers, under conditions of great difficulty and considerable drama. Walker was the last of the first-hand witnesses to publish his version of these exciting events and his testimony is now accepted as the authentic account.

In 1650, Walker married Elizabeth Sadler, who he had met at Barnston one Sabbath when he had exchanged duties with the rector there. For the first year of their marriage, Walker held the living of Croydon. He was active in preaching sermons in the prison there, despite the prevalence of Gaol Fever, which afflicted the judiciary as much as the prisoners. Walker caught the disease himself but he recovered and convalesced at the London house of his father-in-law. The courage he had shown during this period was a hallmark of the man and he was to stick to his post again later in life when he held the living of St Mary Aldermanbury (as well as Fyfield) and continued to preach throughout the Great Plague of 1665.

In 1652, sometime after his complete recovery from Gaol Fever, Walker was appointed by the Earl of Warwick to the living of Fyfield which he held until his death in 1692. He was never, however, a simple country parson. Within Fyfield he is remembered for the school which he founded by his Will, part of which is transcribed on the eighteenth-century benefaction board at the back of St Nicholas' church. It is less well known that he also provided detailed instructions for a grammar school in a barn belonging to Wethers, which house he had bought and rebuilt in expectation that his wife would live there after his death. The grammar school did not, apparently, materialise. His will hints at the extent of his property holdings in Fyfield and neighbouring parishes. He owned houses, farms, fields and woods in profusion, although it is difficult to identify the specific properties today due to name changes, fragmentation and the changed topography. A few names are, however, clearly recognisable, such as Widny Greene, Northwood, Millhatch, Bruetts and, as mentioned, Wethers.

During their life together at the moated rectory, nowadays called Parsonage House, his wife Elizabeth kept a private journal into which her husband promised he would never pry during her lifetime. After her death in 1690, the good doctor, having openly recorded his grief in the parish register, opened his late wife's diary and read, for the first time, the memoirs of a remarkable woman.

He read the carefully observed symptoms of the various illnesses which beset, and ultimately claimed the lives of all their eleven children. He read of her fears on the August night her husband failed to come

home from London, not knowing that he had been attacked by robbers on the road and, later, he read of her anger when he was unjustly imprisoned in Tilbury Fort during the Monmouth Rebellion of 1685. And he read also the contented account of their wedding day, some forty years previously. Anthony Walker was moved by what he read to publish his late wife's biography, based largely upon her own words, subjoined with his own commentary only so far as was necessary to describe her virtues and charity and to convey the immensity of his personal loss.

In the wider context of seventeenth-century society, Walker was a distinguished cleric; chaplain to the king and friend of the mighty. He died in 1692 in London while seeing to the publication of his True Account of the Eikon Basilike. His final resting place is uncertain. He wanted to be buried among his children in the chancel at Fyfield but the record does not indicate that his wish was respected.

His line continued by a single thread. His only daughter to reach adulthood, Margaret, married John Cox of Coggeshall but she died following the birth of their son, John, who went on to Felsted School and eventually joined the Bar.

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