

*The following article was written by Paul Howitt-Cowan and was published in the 2010 summer edition of the Friends of the Old Hall Association magazine. Paul Howitt-Cowan is Chair of the Friends of the Old Hall Association.*

## **' William Hickman, The Pilgrims and The Old Hall ' time for a fresh perspective based on the premise of historical evidence and historical integrity - *shattering illusions***

For many years, it has been categorically said and written, that William Hickman, the early Pilgrims and the Old Hall converged, but is that historically accurate or is it based on circumstantial evidence, which has over the years become unquestioned tradition, when in reality it may be 'myth' and not 'factually' true. Indeed, there was a vibrant Separatist group here in Gainsborough long before Nottinghamshire but it may not have centred on the Old Hall.

There is no primary documentary evidence to date, which confirms that Hickman, the Pilgrims and the Old Hall were ever linked as suggested in past and current literature. Such a position challenges the very marketing and promotion of the Old Hall with its Pilgrim Father Exhibition in the Old Hall and as one of the key centres of the early Pilgrims before Plymouth within the 'quadrilateral.'

As a recent historian has written in his excellent and scholarly book, **"Without documentary evidence, historians have often said [ written] that Smyth and the Separtists worshipped at Gainsborough Old Hall" - 'Making Haste from Babylon ' by Nick Bunker, Bodley Head, 2010**

It raises two points, first about perspicacity as a historian and secondly about historical integrity. You have to be sure of your ground and therefore be able to back it up and if there is not the supporting evidence to preface statements accordingly. At this present time, we cannot be certain and I am open to the fact that one day documentary evidence may surface to present fresh perspectives.

There is no doubt, that the Separatist group led by Rev John Smyth existed in Gainsborough. Indeed, when the local vicar was poorly and unable to take the Sunday service, the parishioners leaned on Smyth to preach, which got him into serious trouble with the Bishop of Lincoln, who had rescinded his licence to function as a clerk in holy orders. Leading churchmen in the Town, including Hickman, wrote to the bishop to account for those circumstances but that does not confirm that Hickman was a supporter of the Puritans or that they once worshipped in the Old Hall.

Sir William Hickman was a controversial lord of the manor, who far from being a protector of the Separatists may have been a persecutor and not their leading light as once thought. In August 1607, John Noble a wealthy draper in the Town, with connections in London, had his hat removed by Hickman in church, a gesture resisted by Puritans. Noble was a founding father of the grammar school and a parish constable. He, with Sir Richard Williamson, and an attorney called Edward Aston fought a protracted legal battle with Hickman, who imposed exorbitant rents on market traders and had tried to close Noble's business down!

Hickman had reported John Noble for non-conformity, which is not an act of a sympathiser! The identity of Noble, Aston and Williamson is more revealing, in that they were members of the Puritan network in the locality which was led by the Rev John Smyth. Hickman is portrayed as a protector of the early pilgrims in Gainsborough, but if Hickman was not, who then was it? That person may well have been Sir Richard Williamson, son of a local draper, born in Gainsborough c1560. He went to Gray's Inn, London to be a lawyer, where there was great sympathy for the puritan cause. Under James I, he was knighted and became a member of the Council of the North based in York. He was a man of political clout and influence, far in excess of Hickman. Sir Richard's nephew was Gervase Nevyle of Grove, near Retford, who was formerly of Gray's Inn, a Puritan sympathiser who challenged the validity of the Church of England High Commission to bring legal proceedings against them not for religious reasons but on civil grounds. The Church stood its ground because such a challenge attacked the royal prerogative. The battle grounds were being drawn.

### **The flight of the Pilgrims in 1608 from Stallingborough Flats > :** FOHA Volume 1, Issue 1

We know more about this event after reading the depositions which have laid dormant for 400 years and have escaped the attention of historians until now. Reading Bradfords' account and the depositions reveal a more exciting event than the stark account written by William Bradford.

**May 9 Monday:** The Francis, a barge plying the east coast with sea coal for London was hired for human cargo and its master, Henry Spencer collected from Gainsborough 10 women, 3 children and 2 men. By the time they reached Stallingborough it had picked up something like 80/100 Separatists with their household stuff.

**May 10 Tuesday:** At Caistor a group of menfolk had walked from Gainsborough 35 miles in a straight line heading for Stallingborough which was reached on Wednesday May 11. One of those on the perambulation was the servant to Thomas Helwys, Edward Arnfield.

**May 12 Thursday:** The Francis had reached its rendezvous to meet a Dutch hoy, that is a vessel with a single mast. Sixteen men in a rowing boat boarded this hoy and set sail as the local magistrates were in pursuit, leaving the occupants of The Francis to the authorities. Henry Spencer and his crewman, Robert Barnby were only too happy to spill 'the beans'.

**May 13 Friday:** The arrest of women and children was relayed down to London to seek instructions of how to deal with them. Interrogation revealed that the flight to Holland was planned not by the Hickmans as suggested in some literature, but by Thomas Helwys. Bradford did not tell us that whereas John Robinson does.

He had hired The Francis to take its human cargo and goods to his cousin Sir Gervase Helwys, Sheriff of Lincolnshire, who sympathised with the separatist cause. Gervase erected in 1599, a family monument in Saundby church. He appointed Rev Richard Clifton to Babworth Church, another separatist stronghold.

The arrest of what were technically 'Brownists' was an embarrassment because from 1593, Brownists could be banished or exiled under the law. Why were the authorities 'on the ball', was it inside information or something else. The quiet areas of the coast line was on red alert for people exporting grain after a bad harvest at home to stop exploitation and such trade had been outlawed. Furthermore, there was suspicion of Catholic insurgency after problems in Ireland. The Separatists were eventually released to see their way clear to sail to Holland possibly because Robert Cecil, the King's chief adviser did not want its ringleaders to come to court and challenge the High Commission i.e. the right of the church to hold civil courts, impose tithes, grant licences, prove probate, hold property simply because the Church was the arm of the State which helped enforce Protestant Uniformity. To challenge that, might lead to questioning the place of the Crown itself. The Catholic threat was a far greater worry at that moment in time!

The 1608 flight brings almost closure to the Gainsborough Separatist group which like a meteor illuminated the Puritan sky in Lincolnshire. However, 12 years later their search for the New Jerusalem led them to cross 'the Pond'. It was to be a commercial undertaking when the Mayflower bravely set off from Plymouth. Behind that commercial contract was the Virginia Company founded in 1606. Interestingly, that company had a Gainsborough connection, the Somerscales, who are a shadowy lot. Robert Somerscales senior who had been co-founder of the local Grammar school with John Noble Somerscale junior was involved in tobacco, well connected and influential. This son will have known all the major players in the Separatist movement in Gainsborough and ideally placed to support them in 1620 .

The events reveal that, the Separatist group in Gainsborough was local grown and protected and cultivated by their own, not by the new upstart, Sir William Hickman. Documentary evidence to date, does not reveal that Sir William Hickman or Rose Hickman played any role in these events whatsoever, they had the connections and background to have been a major players but possibly chose not to do so. It also suggests that the story is not as simplistic as the lord of the manor aiding and abetting the Separatists. Hickman was not the paternal landlord as his forebears became, he was a 'threadbare fellow', who, with those with eyes to see, could see through him for what he was, a cold, calculating, grasping, bully, who managed to alienate the Town and its religious interests.

The Separatists therefore may have never met or worshipped in Gainsborough Old Hall. And Rose Hickman may have been scandalised by the Separatists in the light of her experience against Mary Tudor's Catholicism which Elizabeth I reversed, securing Protestant England. These are indeed shattered illusions of a tradition which carries no documentary evidence whatsoever.