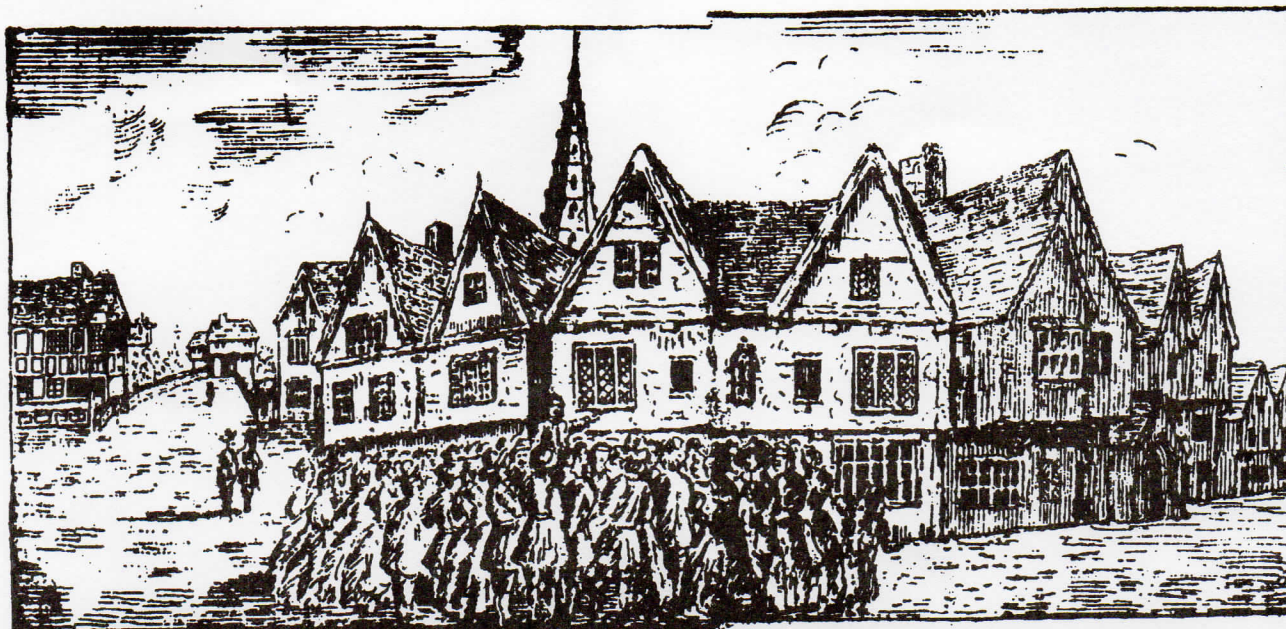


BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN BUNYAN



John Bunyan preaching in front of the Mote - or Moot - Hall, Bedford

Childhood

In 1628 John Bunyan was born in the parish of Elstow, approximately two kilometres to the south of Bedford, where he was baptised on 30 November 1628. He was the son of a tinker. Although the family was poor, they owned a cottage nearby, in the hamlet of Harrowden. Bunyan described his childhood as normal and happy, and he learned to read and write a little. As a child he travelled the district helping his father and learning the trade.

Civil War 1642-45

In 1644, when Bunyan was 16, his mother died and his father remarried within a year. In November 1644 Bunyan was mustered (conscripted) in a county levy of the Parliamentary army. He seems to have spent most of his military service in garrison duty at Newport Pagnell. He later spoke of a narrow escape: "When I was a soldier, I, with others, was drawn out to go to such a place to besiege it; but when I was just ready to go, one of the company desired to go in my place; and coming to the siege, as he stood sentinel, he was shot in the head with a musket bullet, and died."

First marriage and spiritual crisis

Returning to Elstow in 1647 Bunyan resumed his work as a tinker, and the Museum has his anvil and metal violin from this period. Two years later he married a local girl who bore him four children, the first of whom, called Mary, was born blind. The arrival of Mary in 1650 made Bunyan reflect seriously on his life for the first time. He questioned the value of his favourite pastimes such as bell-ringing in Elstow Church, dancing and playing tip-cat, an early form of rounders. In *Grace Abounding* published in 1666, Bunyan describes this period of spiritual crisis admitting that, "Even as a child I had few equals in cursing, swearing, lying and blaspheming the Holy name of God".

Joins Independent Church in Bedford

The Civil War was over but it had made its mark throughout the country. Some people wanted a simpler form of worship and Independent congregations (from the Church of England) began to emerge. John Bunyan found one such congregation in 1653 at St John's Church, south of the river, where he became friends with their pastor John Gifford.

Starts preaching

By 1655 Bunyan and his family were living in St Cuthbert's Street in Bedford and it was at this time that Bunyan discovered he was a gifted preacher, and by 1659 he was recognised beyond the county border as a preacher. In 1656 he became involved in disputes with local Quakers under Edward Burrough and these led to his first book, *Some Gospel Truths Opened*.

Second marriage

In 1658 his first wife died and the following year he married his second wife, Elizabeth, with whom he had two children. In this year he published his most ambitious theological work, *The Doctrine of the Law and Grace Unfolded*.

Arrested for preaching

In 1660 Cromwell's Protectorate came to an end and the monarchy was restored. In the belief that national unity could only be achieved by religious uniformity, the state attempted to restrain the developing Independent congregations by forbidding preaching. Bunyan was arrested in the hamlet of Samsell just after he had begun a meeting. He was held at nearby Harlington Manor overnight and appeared before the local justices there when he was sentenced to three months in prison.

Prison

Since Bunyan refused to give an assurance not to preach he remained in the County Gaol for 12 years from 1660 to 1672. The County Gaol was demolished in 1801, but one of its prison doors was saved and is on display within the Museum. In vain, his wife Elizabeth tried to get his case reopened by pleading with Sir Matthew Hale, the Lord Chief Justice of England, when he stayed in Bedford. Bunyan was allowed several privileges as a prisoner, since he was not a common criminal. The prison was only five minutes from his home so food was brought into his cell, often by his blind daughter Mary, and a stoneware jug believed to have been used for this purpose can be seen in the Museum. He also received daily visits from friends and had occasional excursions from prison, keeping him in close contact with members of the congregation. He is reputed to have made a wooden flute out of a stool leg in his prison cell: this is on display at the Museum. During

imprisonment he supported his family by making "long tagged bootlaces" which they could sell.

Writing *The Pilgrim's Progress*

This period in prison was used for writing. In 1663 came *Christian Behaviour* followed in 1665 by *The Holy City* and in 1666 by *Grace Abounding*, his spiritual autobiography. It is thought that the impetus for the latter might have been the knowledge of the 40 people who died of the plague on the north side of the river where John Bunyan was imprisoned. This is mentioned in St Paul's Parish Register. It was during the years 1667-72 that Bunyan probably wrote much of the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Pastor of Bedford Church

In 1672 King Charles II issued the Declaration of Religious Indulgence and Bunyan, like other church offenders, was released from prison. He was immediately appointed pastor of the Independent congregation in Bedford, which later bought a barn and orchard in Mill Lane as their place of meeting. In 1673 the King was forced to withdraw his Declaration, and early in 1677 Bunyan returned to prison.



17th century print of Bunyan in prison

"Bishop Bunyan"

Apart from this second (and some people think there was a third) brief spell in prison Bunyan spent his time from 1672 onwards preaching, directing the affairs of the Church and visiting outlying congregations and sister churches in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Surrey and in London. It is now that he earned the nickname "Bishop Bunyan".

More books

On 18 February 1678 Bunyan published the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. During the last ten years of his life he wrote a further 40 books including *The Life and Death of Mr Badman* (1680), *The Holy War* (1682) and *The Pilgrim's Progress - Second Part* (1685).

Bunyan's will

In 1685 Bunyan made a deed of gift of his property to his wife, probably to avoid confiscation during the period of renewed persecution. This will was found during the later

demolition of the Bunyan's Bedford home and is displayed in the Museum.

Death

On 31 August 1688 John Bunyan died in London. He had been on a mission of mercy to Reading, to effect a reconciliation between a young neighbour of his and the father with whom he had quarrelled. The mission successfully accomplished, Bunyan continued his journey on horseback to London. On the way he was overtaken by a great storm of wind and rain, and he arrived at the house of his friend, John Strudwick on Snow Hill, drenched to the skin and feeling unwell. In spite of his evident weakness and sickness, he insisted on fulfilling an engagement to preach on the following Sunday, at the Meeting House of one John Gammons in Petticoat Lane. He then returned to John Strudwick's house, where he grew weaker, and a few days later died. Bunyan was buried in the Strudwick family vault in the burial ground of Bunhill Fields, City Road, London. Bunhill Fields is noted as the resting place of many prominent Dissenters.



17th century print of Bunyan, with a view of Bedford in the background