

Richard Taverner of Brisley

In Taverner's day, being involved in the pioneering work of translating the Bible into English - the people's language - for the first time, was a life-threatening business. If you weren't executed for your endeavours, you knew someone who was.

Richard Taverner was born in the north Norfolk village of Brisley, to parents John and Alice in about the year 1505. He would have been christened as an infant at the font that still stands within the medieval walls of St Bartholomew's Parish Church. In those days the now faint wall paintings - including a St Christopher on either side opposite the north and south doors for travellers to see - at this strategic halfway point between Lynn and Norwich - would have been bright, bold, and full of colour.



Richard was well educated and went off to Oxford and later Cambridge Universities to study Law, along with an excellent understanding of Latin and in particular, Greek. It was direct from the oldest Greek texts that William Tyndale, in the 1520's, pioneered the radical and daring enterprise of rendering the Bible in English for the ordinary person to read. At that time few people could read the exclusive Latin version, and yet it was considered sacred, and that reducing it to the 'vulgar tongue' of ordinary folk would somehow diminish its standing. Such new translation would be denounced as offensive heresy, and you would pay the consequences. Tyndale's revolutionary New Testament published in 1526 caused a great stir. Being a thoughtful young student ready to challenge long held tradition, Richard managed to get hold of a copy of Tyndale's dynamic book. But when he was found out, he was forced to burn it publicly as a penance - or face severe punishment.

The work of the English translators and printers continued but remained underground. Finally, Tyndale was tracked down to his hideaway on mainland Europe and was burnt at the stake in 1536. Undaunted, a new and complete Bible version in English by Miles Coverdale was published, followed by a combined version of that and Tyndale, under an editor's pseudonym of Thomas Matthew. Then, fourth in line, came our own hero Richard Taverner, who brought his skilful knowledge of Greek to bear on the texts, especially of the New Testament and the Apocrypha (books in between the Old and New Testaments), keeping what he considered the best elements of Tyndale, Coverdale, and Matthew.

Richard came up with the now familiar word 'parable' for the symbolic stories of Jesus, adapting the original Greek word. Previously this had been translated as 'similitude'. Richard's version has a long official title, beginning with the words *The Most Sacred Bible...*, but is popularly known simply as Taverner's Bible. It was published in London in 1539 (and reprinted as a second edition in 1551) and earns the notable mark of being the first English Bible ever to be printed *in* England - earlier versions having originated on the Continent, away from the prying English authorities.

However, in the same year a new, alternative 'best of' Tyndale and Coverdale was published, which became known as The Great Bible - because of its cumbersome size and hefty weight. King Henry VIII had a change of heart - as Tyndale had prayed with his dying breath that he would - and declared that from now on every parish church in the land should have an English Bible chained securely to its lectern for any rank and file of the community to read or listen to: And the chosen version was to be the most up to date, hot off the press: The Great Bible.

This meant that Taverner's version, although pioneering and very much part of that initial momentous explosion of creativity and daring, became overshadowed, and relatively few were printed. Original copies do still exist, and because of the rarity value, a single, framed page of Taverner's Bible can fetch hundreds of pounds from specialist antique dealers. Ultimately Taverner's and those early English classics of translation - especially Tyndale's primary version - all became disseminated in 1611 in the Bible to end all Bibles of that era at least, the famous King James Bible, a.k.a. the Authorised Version, still much-loved today for its poetry and gravitas. All stemming from those early pioneers - including Taverner, some of

whose phraseology remains in the KJB, such as Jesus being ‘the express image’ of God (Hebrews ch.1 v.3 - PTO).

Despite King Henry’s apparent softening attitude, the times remained politically fraught - which included anything relating to religious ideas. As a horrific example, a Norwich boy of just 15 was apparently burned alive at the stake for possessing merely a single sheet with The Lord’s Prayer printed in English. Richard found himself on the wrong side of the King’s favour in December 1541, owing to his association with Henry’s Chief Minister Thomas Cromwell, and was briefly imprisoned in the Tower of London. The peace remained at best fragile for several years, for instance the editor of the Matthew’s Bible being executed in 1555, under (Roman Catholic) Queen Mary’s reign.

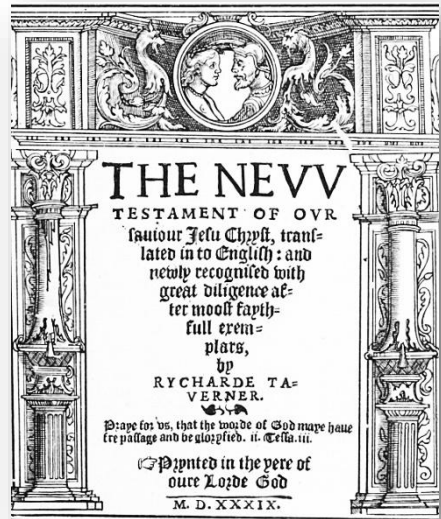
Richard took up a quieter existence in Oxford, becoming a Justice of the Peace and then County High Sheriff, and was granted a licence by the Protestant monarch Edward VI to be a lay preacher at the Oxford University Church of St Mary’s for the last 20 or so years of his life. He was married and had a family, his grandson John Taverner later becoming an ordained priest.

Richard passed away, having reached his ‘three score years and ten’ (Psa. 90 v.10), on the 14th of July 1575. His body was laid to rest under the chancel of Wood Eaton Church, just outside Oxford. There exists no known historic portrait of Richard, but we have at Brisley Church an imagined depiction of him holding his Bible, created in 2020 by Brisley artist Graham Bell, which stands alongside other notables at the traditional rood screen niches – and printed on the front of this leaflet. His pictorial plinth features the word ‘Renewal’, alluding to his work on the English Bible promoting a relatable spiritual faith. A rough image of Richard is carved on the village sign that stands outside the church’s east window. And the shield of a brass plaque to his parents can still be seen in the floor of the nave, in front of the north pews.

The motivation that spurred-on Taverner and his fellow Reformers against a backdrop of great personal danger, was that ordinary people should have direct access to the ancient stories and poetry of Scripture, and to the sayings and narrative of Christ. Part of an ongoing process of renewal and reformation that is still as relevant now as it was 500 years ago.

Hebrews 1: 1-4

God in time past diversely
and many ways,
spake unto the fathers by the prophets
but in these last days
he hath spoken unto us by his son,
whom he hath made heir of all things:
by whom also he made the world,
which being the brightness of his glory,
and express image of his substance,
bearing up all things
with the word of his power,
hath to his own person purged our sins,
and is sitten on the right hand
of the majesty on high,
and is more excellent than the angels,
for as much as he hath
by inheritance obtained
a more excellent name
than they.



Wisdom of Solomon 3: 1-6 & 8-9

But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and the pain of death shall not touch them.
In the sight of the unwise they appear to die,
and their end is taken for deep destruction.
The way of the righteous is judged to be bitter destruction,
but they are in rest.
And though they suffer pain before men,
yet is their hope full of immortality.
They are punished but in few things,
never the less, in many things they shall be well rewarded.
For God proveth them, and findeth them meet for himself,
yea as the gold in the furnace doth he try them,
and receiveth them as a burnt offering,
and when the time commeth, they shall be looked upon.
...and their Lord shall reign forever.
They that put their trust in him, shall understand the truth,
and such as be faithful, will agree unto him in love:
for his chosen shall have gifts and peace.