

LONG DITTON IN 1685

Some notes by Peter Fussell

The National Scene

1685 was a momentous year in the history of England and one event in particular was to trigger a sequence of actions which were to have a lasting effect on the nation.

By the beginning of 1685 a quarter of a century had passed since the end of the tribulations of Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth, the horrors of the Civil War were now 40 years past and the Protestant/Catholic discords in the reigns of Henry VIII, Elizabeth and Mary were now over a century away in history. During the 25 years since the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 the country, under Charles II, had experienced a variety of episodes (Plague, Great Fire of London, two wars against the Dutch) which had temporary weakening effects on the economy but, on the whole, England had prospered.

Then came the bombshell – Charles II died on 6 February 1685 and was succeeded by his brother James II who, unlike Charles, was a vain, bigoted and arrogant man who extracted every ounce of benefit from the privileges of his office. But worse — James was a Catholic. It was the prospect of an unending Catholic dynasty that set in motion the sequence of events which culminated in the Act of Settlement 1701, an Act that regulated the succession to the throne and required every future sovereign to be a member of the Church of England.

Meanwhile, on 11 June, the Duke of Monmouth (Charles II illegitimate son) returned from exile in an attempt to overthrow James but was defeated by the King's troops at the Battle of Sedgemoor on 5 July. The uprising gave Judge Jeffreys the excuse for the 'Bloody Assizes' in his campaign in the West Country against the Protestant 'rebels'.

In October the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV, making Protestantism an illegal religion, caused the exodus from France of over 50,000 Huguenot families, many of whom settled in S.E. England. James prorogued Parliament on 20 November, because it protested against his illegal grant of commissions to Catholics, and it was never to be re-assembled again during his reign.

The Local Scene

In 1685 Long Ditton was very much a country parish, sparsely populated with probably no more than thirty or so families in the whole parish – perhaps 120–150 residents in all. Apart from the Church and the dwellings for these few families the parish was entirely open countryside – mainly arable but with some meadow pasture and woodland.

The most important inhabitant was, of course, the Lord of the Manor, Edward Evelyn. Born in 1626 he had married Mary Balam of Sawston in 1659 and his marriage into this successful Cambridgeshire merchant family brought more wealth into the Evelyn coffers; several other members of the Balam family eventually moved to Ditton. Edward had been knighted in 1676 and created a baronet in 1683 by Charles II. His honours did not stop there, though, for when a Charter was granted to Kingston in 1685 for a new Corporation, James II appointed Edward an Alderman of Kingston as well as a Knight of the Shire in Parliament. Edward lived in the Manor House and was a generous benefactor to the Parish. His name always headed the list of donors to the various 'Briefs' for which collections were made in Church; he always made a point of attending those special services which involved his servants (eg the wedding of his manservant in 1680) and was always in Church on Sundays for Holy Communion. He was a member of the Parish Vestry, regularly attended meetings and gave to the Vestry a vellum-covered book for the recording of minutes.

The Rector was Robert Pocock. Born in 1627 he matriculated in 1643, attained the degree of BA in 1647 and graduated MA from Corpus Christi College, Oxford in 1660. He was appointed Rector of Long Ditton in 1665 and married Sarah Lough of Sherbourne, Hants, four years later. Pocock stayed as Rector for 49 years until his death in 1714 and both he and his wife, like the Evelyn's were generous benefactors to the Parish. The Vestry book records several gifts they made to the Church:

“A large coffin: the gift of Mr. Ro. Pocock, Rector.”

“A large Carpet of Green Cloath for the Communion Table: The gift of Mrs. Sarah Pocock.”

“A fair Green Cushion for the Pulpit: the gift of Mrs. Sarah Pocock.”

and the Pocock's name is rarely missing from the collection lists.

The Vestry book shows that at the meeting on Easter Monday, April 20, 1685 the Vestry made its annual appointments of Churchwardens, Overseers for the Poor, Constables, Headboroughs and Surveyors for the Highways and a later page gives an interesting account of moneys paid out by Will. Brooks, Overseer for the Poor. They included:-

	£	s	d
“For house rent for Goody Baynham, a whole year :	02	10	00
Given to Rich. Gardner in his want :	00	00	06
Paid to Ro. Mann for keeping a poor child a whole year :	04	11	00
Paid out on a Nurse to attend Tho. Matthews in his sickness :	00	05	00”

The Registers show 20 baptisms, 1 marriage and 17 burials to have taken place during the year. The funeral of George Evelyn, eldest son of Sir Edward, on 22 September must have been a sad occasion for the family since the two younger sons had already died in infancy. George was twenty-two at the time of his death, leaving his sister Penelope as Sir Edward's eventual heir.