

EMINENT KIDDERMINSTER VICTORIANS Part 9 WILLIAM BUTLER BEST 1702-1865) *Mike Loftus*

William Butler Best (shown on the steps of the Lion Hotel in this engraving by J Thomas) was well into middle age by the time that Queen Victoria came to the throne in 1837, but he was closely involved in quintessential Victorian issues. First, the effort to bring a railway service to



Kidderminster. Best was busy in the 1840s, trying to ensure that Kidderminster was connected to that system. The other was the creation of new institutions of local government which brought an (admittedly rather modest) degree of democracy to local affairs.

The family trade of his father and grandfather had been milling but he made his fortune as a wool-stapler – a dealer in wool and part of the supply chain for the carpet weaving industry. He also became a substantial landowner in the area. By 1834 he was the owner of Blakebrook House, a very fine house a mile or so

outside the town to which area more wealthy citizens were moving to escape the clamour of the town centre.

His father and grandfather had been prominent nonconformists. William turned his back on the family tradition becoming a staunch Anglican – or churchman in contemporary styling. He became a fierce defender of Church and Crown against trends that were seen as attacking these traditional values. It was perhaps Best's commitment as a defender of Church and Crown against trends that were seen as attacking traditional values that saw him elected to the first 'proper' Town Council and appointed as the very first Mayor in January 1836. He was also appointed a magistrate that year and continued to sit on the bench until shortly before his death.

The first proposals to connect Kidderminster to the emerging national rail network came in 1835 but did not progress. However full-scale railway mania arrived in the mid-1840s when railway proposals exploded in a way that paid little heed to either financial or engineering reality. As a consequence, by 1844, Kidderminster was being offered four different railway options. Best was once again serving as mayor and was trying to sort out the confusion this created. The town wanted a direct service to London but for many the second-best option was connection through Worcester.

In 1845 Best gave evidence to the relevant House of Commons Committee. He presented himself with great conviction as a person with a finger on the pulse of the town and regaled the Committee with statistics of the flow of various material into and out of the town. Nine hundred and ninety-nine people out of a thousand in the town, he insisted, wanted access to a London-Birmingham connection and opposed what was now dubbed the 'Great Western' scheme – through Worcester.

In the event Kidderminster got a service provided by the Oxford, Worcester and Wolverhampton railway – which did for a while have the involvement of Great Western and I K Brunel.

The very pinnacle of Best's life perhaps came in 1849 when his son John was elected to be Kidderminster's MP.

The election threw a light on the way that the elections were conducted in Kidderminster because the result was challenged, alleging corrupt practices by Best and his supporters.



The investigation found no evidence that John Best himself had been directly involved in the treating of voters (paying for food drink and other entertainment) or direct bribes to voters and so the election was allowed to stand. However, it was clear that Best's supporters, particularly his father, had been generously present at much of the quaffing and quenching that went on.

John Best lost his seat at the next general election. Best senior distinguished himself in that election chiefly through insensitive abuse of the other candidate Robert Lowe's affliction with albinism – such abuse taking place when Best was in a what a local newspaper called an 'elevated' state.

W B Best took a smaller part of the public life of the town after this. The liberal Worcester Chronicle noted after his death in February

1865 the passing of a 'true unswerving thoroughgoing Conservative' of the old school.

Memories of Westbourne Street, Bewdley

Walking down Westbourne Street today, it's hard to imagine that it was ever anything other than the quiet, residential street it is now. I am old enough to remember when ancient housing was knocked down to create a small car park on the north side, at the junction with the Stourport Road and the County Council yard almost opposite. The houses removed were then considered unfit for human habitation, but I don't suppose that would happen with today's more enlightened views on conservation.

When I became one of Jim Palmer's Butchers Saturday delivery boys in 1960, of which I have written about elsewhere, Westbourne Street and environs were a comparative hive of activity. On Kidderminster Road was Piper's Traditional Grocers Store, next to the Great Western. Next to the viaduct were two small shops which I think were owned by a Miss Taylor. One was a Fashion shop and one a Ladies hairdresser which later became the base for G B Gregg automotive engineer. Passing under the viaduct, on the corner opposite the Red Lion was Bridgemans, which was probably a bit more of a convenience store. Next door to this was White's Gents Hairdresser and 50 yards further down was the sub post office run by Joe Garbett and his wife. The Wribbenhall Sub Post office was where we all bought our fire works for November the 5th. They also sold groceries and confectionery.

The Red Lion pub sat at the top of Westbourne Street with Jim's Butchers shop 20 yards further down and a further 30 yards down, on the same side was Simmonds Grocers, run by Joe Simmonds and his wife. Halfway down the street was the cut off to the Kidderminster Road, known locally as "The Cobbles." Here was the main gate to the Primary School, the old churchyard, the Blackboy Hotel and, most importantly, the Fish and Chip shop.

In the 1960s the daily calm experienced now was shattered by the clanking of milk bottles in Thomas's Dairy bottling unit, mysterious clickings and clackings from Lowe's Rope Works, and the noise of steam railway engines shunting or passing through Bewdley station. The sounds were enhanced by the odd smells that emanated on occasions from Styles Provender Mills. It's quite amazing to think how all those retail shops were able to exist and run successfully. However, they all offered something slightly different and trade was sustained by the twice daily processions to and from

the school of parents and children. The other major source of passing trade for many years were the workers travelling to the Steatite and Porcelain works in Lickhill, Stourport. Even in the 1960's I believe two coach loads of ladies were still being collected at the bottom of Westbourne Street every morning and returned in the evening to go home.

Looking towards Stourport from the bottom of Westbourne Street, on the corner of Station Drive, was The Highwayman Café which had its own tennis court which could be hired for private play. They also sold Lyons - Maid ice cream which was quite rare in those days locally where Midland Counties was the dominant supplier. Hunts Builder's Merchants was on the opposite corner of Station Drive. Finally, I will give a mention to the newsagents which was visible from the bottom of the street looking towards Bewdley. When I was a boy, it was run by Mr Asberry who also made his own ice cream which was even better than Teddy Gray's. When he retired, it became known as Boultons which many people will still remember.

Incidentally, my father Ken, born and bred a Wribbenhall man, maintained the alternate name of Whispering Street really came from 1930's. Then even more Bewdley Ladies worked at the Steatite factory and the end of Westbourne Street was their transport assembly point. The name gained common currency from the local (male no doubt) wags because of all the daily gossiping and the whispers of who was going out with who. It's modern association with the plague etc always brought him out in fits of laughter!

The closure of the Dairy started the commercial decline of the area. The school closed and the Steatite work force shrank drastically in the 1960s. New owners attempted to breathe life into the shops but, despite their best efforts, all gradually ceased to trade. Funnily enough, when the Ropeworks ceased trading in 1971, Dad started Bewdley Printing in the string manufacturing building. I joined him in 1974 and had almost 20 years very happily working there until I moved the business to larger and more modern premises in Kidderminster. I don't think Dad ever really forgave me!

Neil Sollom

The 2026 AGM of **Worcestershire Historical Society** will take place on Saturday 10 October 2026 in The Studio at The Hive, Sawmill Walk, The Butts, Worcester WR1 3PD from 2.00pm. As usual, the brief, formal business will be followed by a talk, and our speaker this time will be Dr Erica Canela. Her talk is titled: 'Zealous in Captivity: George Fox, Worcester, and the Politics of Imprisonment' and will be followed by light refreshments. Last year we attempted, for the first time, to make this event available on-line as well as having in-person attendance. I am awaiting confirmation, but we hope to be able to offer this again for 2026. Guests are welcome. If you would like to attend in person, please contact Mrs. Joy Morgan at whshonsec@gmail.com by 2 October or for on-line attendance by Wednesday 7 October 2026.

Recollections
of
Old and New Kidderminster
by Henry Bennett

A collection of nine articles published in the
Kidderminster Shuttle

Between

11th December 1909 and the 16th April 1910

Transcribed by Bob Millward December 2013

Recollections of Old and New Kidderminster

by Henry Bennett

Introduction

Articles entitled 'Recollections of Old and New Kidderminster' by Henry Bennett appeared in the Kidderminster Shuttle between 11th December 1909 and the 16th April 1910. The last article on 16th April 1910 promised further contributions but none seem to have appeared. Henry Bennett was born in Kidderminster in 1832 and lived for many years in Cherry Orchard. He was a hairdresser and did his apprenticeship in Ludlow. Returning to Kidderminster, he had hairdressing establishments in Mill St and Coventry St before finally settling in Swan St. He was also a Town Councillor representing St George's Ward.

Transcriptions of the nine articles in the collection, together with some additional notes, have been prepared by Bob Millward (December 2013). Note: two successive articles were given the same number: 'VI'. These have been renumbered VIa & VIb.

Below, Bennett's Barber shop and pole is shown in Swan St partly obscured by the old Guildhall.



Recollections of Old and New Kidderminster

(Kidderminster Shuttle 11 December 1909)

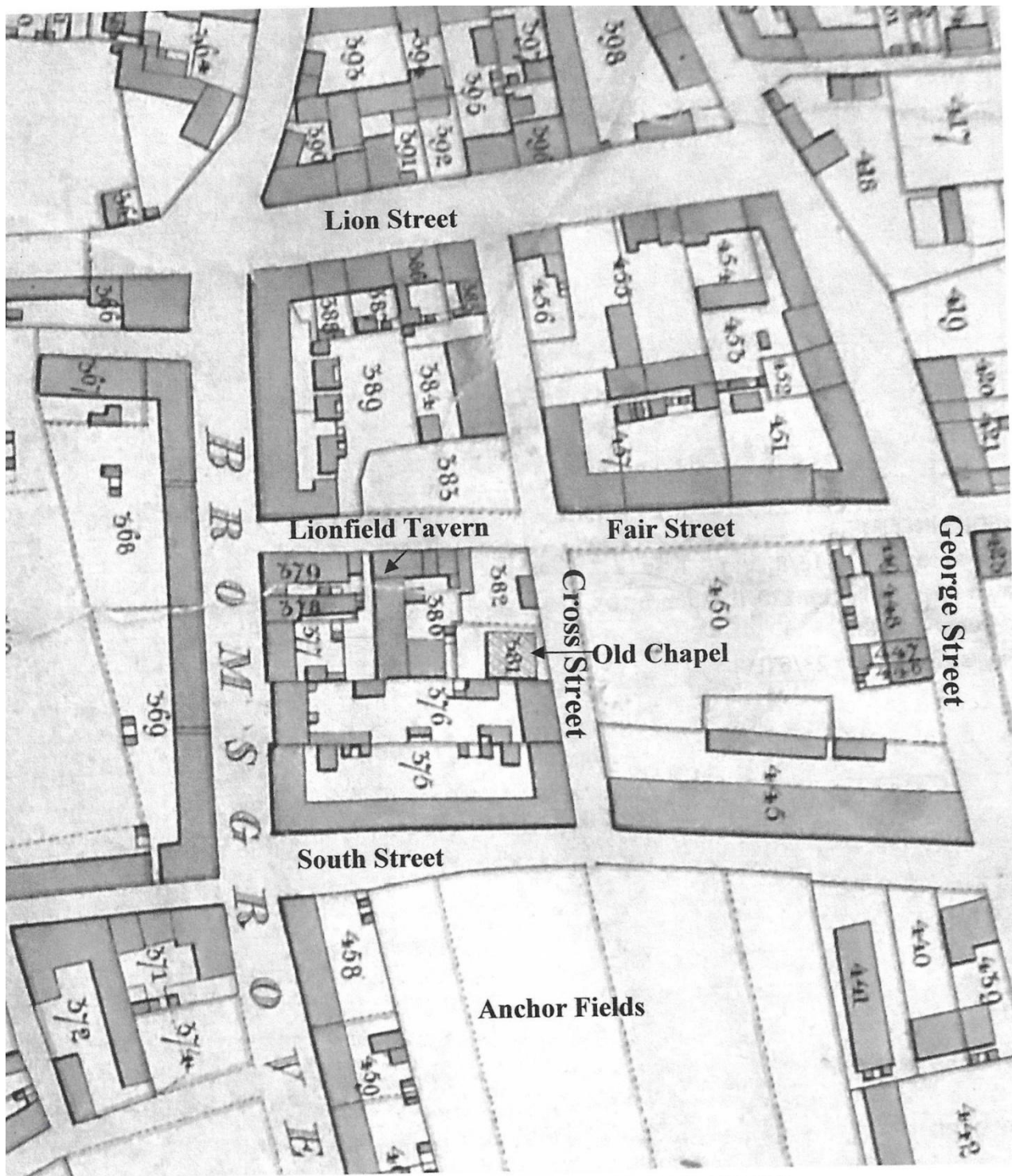
by Henry Bennett

I.

Sir,- A large number of old friends have repeatedly asked me to tell them what I remember about old Kidderminster. I cannot tell them anything before the year 1832, as that was the year of my birth. I was born at the *Paul Pry*, in Bromsgrove-street, which is now a pawnshop. I afterwards moved into Cross-street, into the house near the Old Primitive Methodist Chapel, where the bakehouse, the property of Alderman Taylor, now stands. I well remember the late Richard Godson's election, in 1837, he being carried shoulder high after he had beaten John Bagshaw. This was on July 25th, 1837. In the crowd was a noted character, called "Tommy Oliver," riding a donkey with a lady covered with Godson's colours. From that time up to the present, I have always known something about electioneering. Where the iron church now stands, and all in Anchor Fields, were allotment gardens.

Opposite the old chapel was a field used as pleasure grounds and for fairs. Opposite, at the *Lionfield Tavern*, lived High Constable Law. He wore a cocked hat. Bennett and Patch used to pitch their tents and stay there for weeks. Just about this time they were moving the turnpike gates from the Round House to Hoobrook. My father and mother went to live at the old "Round House", to take charge of the weighing machine, until the house was taken down, on the site of the Brinton Fountain. The "*Worcester Cross*" was at this time kept by a man named Jasper. This was a grandfather to the present Richard Jasper. On the Cross side of the road there were only three houses until you got to Hill Grove. Up Comberton-lane, as it was then called, there were only three lamps. The bottom one was opposite old Beck Swan's house, the old letter writer. The boys used to tease her, as they played by the lamp near her house. The Cherry Orchard was a very pretty sight in the spring, when the apple and plum trees were in full bloom. I and Miller Corbet with others helped to cut the trees down to make a way between Comberton-road to George-street, and George Holloway was the first to go across from Comberton-road to George-street. This road has proved a great boon to that side of the town. I remember when there were no houses from the *Railway Bell* all the way to Lower Comberton. The picturesque old gothic cottage, which stood in the middle of the Cherry Orchard, was the admiration of all—visitors and residents alike. Some of the old cherry trees are still at the rear of the houses in Lea-street. The cottage was burnt down just about the time that the land was taken over in building allotments. A William Snell (a sadler of Coventry-street) was the man who had the lot with the cottage on it, and he used it for workmen to make horse collars in, which were stuffed with straw, and by some accident a lot of straw took fire, which completely destroyed the cottage. Before

the present road across the valley of the Cherry Orchard to George Street was made "a tip" was in existence for many years, to fill it up as it is to-day.



Jeremiah Mathews Map of the Borough 1835

Notes: The 1835 Jeremiah Mathews Borough map helps to put some of Henry Bennett's comments into perspective. The Anchor Fields garden allotments are shown and also the field (450) opposite to the old Primitive Methodist Chapel where the fairs were held. The Lionfield Tavern is also marked. Street names have been added. Perhaps the name Fair Street arose from its proximity to the fair ground.

It is interesting to compare the photograph here (probably 1950s to 1960s) with the 1835 map above.

The photograph shows the old Chapel in Cross Street and the houses next door which were clearly in place when the area was surveyed for the Mathews map. In the distance a row of terraced houses has been built on plot 383 which is shown empty in 1835. (Bob Millward March 2013)



Cross Street photograph, courtesy

Thanks are due to Bob Millward and The Kidderminster Civic Society

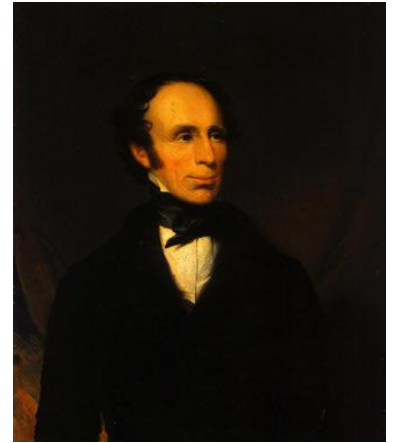
Did Charles Dickens Visit Redditch ?

It has long been believed by many that Charles Dickens visited Redditch in 1850. This belief arose from an article published in *Household Words* in January 1852 simply entitled *Needles*. *Household Words* was a two penny weekly magazine published between 30th March 1850 and 28th May 1859. Its editor was Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and its sub editor was W. H. Wills. Unlike today where most articles in newspapers are credited with their authors, in this magazine the authors were not mentioned. This raises the question: did Charles Dickens write this article?



The article in question is a long, detailed account of the way needles were manufactured. It is based on a visit to the Victoria Works in Edward Street hosted by the owner, Mr John James. The account involves much travelling around the town visiting the homes of factory workers where outwork was undertaken, and various mills where different processes were being carried out. Mr James was proud of the fact that he did not employ anyone under 10 and all his employees had had a good school education. However, it was clear that the visitor, as they explored other employers in the town, did come across children of 7 or more undertaking simple tasks such as glueing labels onto packets of needles.

This was not the first description of needle making in Redditch. In the 12th January 1843 edition of the *Penny Magazine* an article appeared entitled: *A Day at the British Needle Mills, Redditch*. (1) We know that this was written by George Dodd (1808 – 1881), an English industrial writer, who was recruited by Charles Knight, the owner of the *Penny Magazine*, to write a series of articles entitled ‘Days at the Factories’ (2). Like the later article, this was an extended and detailed account of social conditions in the needle-making industry. Dodd travelled with an artist so the article is enhanced with sketches of some of the workers they met as they worked at their bench. These two articles have led some to believe that Dickens visited Redditch twice.



In the nine years that *Household Words* was published, there were some 380 contributors, of whom 90 were women. Two of these were well known both then and now: Elizabeth Gaskell and Harriet Martineau (1802-1876). The latter was a writer in her own right and is considered to be the mother of Sociology. She travelled abroad widely and wrote numerous books including “*Society in America*” (1837). In 1850 she agreed with Dickens to write for *Household Words* before the first edition was even published. There was a mutual respect between the two with Dickens saying her book on America was the best ever written. Dickens regarded her as a ‘forceful journalist’ who had a ‘ready pen, wrote clearly and was a firm believer in progress’. (3) Initially, she wrote stories for the magazine but found this unfulfilling. She suggested writing articles about manufacturing and contributed nine such articles. She wrote the article, ‘*Needles*’ which Dickens edited and published in 1852. It was Martineau who visited Redditch to research her article. The evidence for her writing the article can be found in *Dickens Journal Online* (4) and *Hard Times and the Factory Controversy: Dickens vs. Harriet Martineau*. (3)



By 1853 Martineau had fallen out with Dickens and she never contributed to *Household Words* again. By this time Charles Dickens had become a celebrity. The first time the term ‘celebrity’ was used was 1851 and he certainly fitted the bill. He had already had huge success with novels such as ‘*Pickwick Papers*’ (1837), ‘*Oliver Twist*’ (1838), ‘*Christmas Carol*’ (1843) and ‘*David Copperfield*’ (1850). With all his commitments in London and his writing it is unlikely he would find the time to visit that ‘remarkable village in Worcestershire’.

It is always a little sad to have to dispel a myth that has given people pleasure and, of course, it is always possible that Dickens did visit Redditch, but not to write an article about needle making. While there is no evidence of such a visit, we do have well-documented evidence of his association with Birmingham where he expressed his admiration for its working people and their ambitions to improve themselves. Redditch had its own celebrities who promoted education and pushed for change and progress.

Sources:

1. Supplement 33 of the *Penny Magazine* Vol 12 January 12th 1843.
2. *Days at the Factories: a Tour of Victorian Industry with the Penny Magazine*. Article by Geoffrey Tweedale for the Society for the History of Technology. 1988.
3. *Hard Times and the Factory Controversy: Dickens vs Harriet Martineau* by K. J. Fielding and Anne Smith in *Nineteenth Century Fiction* Vol 24 No 4 The Charles Dickens Centennial (March 1970) pages 404 – 427.
4. *Dickens Journal Online: Household Words*. 28th February 1852. Vol IV pages 540-546.

Article written and researched by Graham and Sue Smith

A 'bit of Greek' from the 17th Century.

I am currently President of The Old Carolians Association for 2025/26, the organization that represents former pupils of King Charles I School, Kidderminster.

My Vice-President, Dr Nigel Geary, has been very active in his efforts to forge better



links between the Association and the current School, in recognition of the fact that the current membership of the Old Carolians is still dominated by those of us who attended the old Grammar School on Bewdley Rd.

As part of this initiative, Nigel has obtained an original 1649 pocket-sized copy of the book "*Eikon Basilike - The Pourtraicture of His Sacred Majestie in His Solitudes and Sufferings*". This is a spiritual and religious diary of King Charles I, prepared in and dated 1648, but published in the aftermath of his execution on 30th January 1649.

Eikon Basilike is Greek for 'Royal Image' or 'Royal Portrait'. From the photographs, it can be seen that the edition obtained by Nigel is in need of some careful conservation and re-binding.

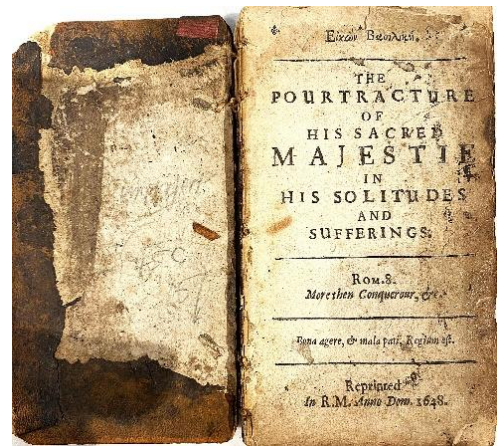
As a member of the Society of King Charles the Martyr, I have had a 19th Century printing of the book for some time, but original editions from 1649 are now quite rare. A few years ago however, I was privileged to be shown a normal (close to A5) size 1649 edition of '*Eikon Basilike*' in excellent condition in the Hurd Library at Hartlebury Castle. This was thanks to the late and sadly missed Chris Penney, when she was Librarian.

The book is purported to be a spiritual autobiography of King Charles I, but it's authorship has always been open to debate.

John Gauden (1605 - 1662), who was briefly Bishop of Worcester in the year of his death, claimed to have written it. Some later editions however, contain a sworn statement by William Levett, groom of the bedchamber to the King, that he witnessed Charles writing the text during the time of his imprisonment on the Isle of Wight. My opinion, for what it's worth, is that '*Eikon Basilike*' does indeed consist of the writings of King Charles I, but edited and assembled for publication by Bishop John Gauden.

The book is essentially religious, founded upon the King's own view of Anglican tradition. Taking into account that view and written in the prose of the time, it portrays a steadfast monarch who admits his weaknesses, but defends his religious principles and political motives. It confirms Charles' trust in God throughout his trials and misfortunes.

History suggests that on any view, Charles I was not one of our greatest kings, but it is apparent that he was steadfast in his beliefs and would not abandon the episcopal Church of England he had inherited from his father, King James I. He resisted pressures for change from Puritans and other Calvinists, placed upon him during his imprisonment.





'*Eikon Basilike*' was a masterpiece of Royalist propaganda and was extremely popular, despite official disapproval during the years of the Protectorate. 36 editions of the book were published in 1649 alone. At the Restoration, on 19th May 1660, the Convocation of Canterbury and York canonised Charles I at the urging of his son King Charles II and added his name to the prayer book. Charles I is the only saint formally canonised by the Church of England and the popularity of '*Eikon Basilike*' was, no doubt, a key factor in this outcome.

Hopefully, the copy obtained by Nigel Geary can be conserved and re-bound for the benefit of King Charles I School and The Old Carolians Association. I understand he has approached BBC's "The Repair Shop" for assistance, so good luck with that!

David Simons
