

IZAACK WALTON

(1593-1683)

'Stafford has made no richer contribution to the world than this gifted son of hers, who closed his creel and went to heaven in 1683, at the ripe old age of ninety.'

THE LIFE STORY

It is ironical that a man famous during his lifetime for writing a series of excellent biographies did not commit his own story to paper. What details he could have recorded of a life that spanned the reins of four monarchs and Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate. Some of the events of Izaak's long life are well documented, some are fairly clear but others only very sparsely detailed. There are still several mysteries for the history detective to solve - this account tells the Izaak Walton story from a collection of reliable sources.

By the second half of the 16th century, the Waltons were a well-established yeoman family of east Staffordshire. George Walton was bailiff of the village of Yoxall, a post which gave him prosperity and a social standing virtually on the level of squire. In 1592 George's second son, Jervis, left Yoxall and moved with his wife Anne to the town of Stafford. Here he set up business as a tippler, a trade ranking between alehouse keeper and innkeeper. The couple settled in the county town and a son was born there the next year.

Izaak Walton was born in Eastgate Street, Stafford. The exact date of his birth isn't known - the ninth of August 1593 is often quoted but this is probably only a much-repeated error by an early biographer. Thankfully Izaak's baptism in the town's St Mary's church was recorded in the parish register on 21 September 1593.

Jervis died when Izaak was only three years old. His mother married again the following year to Humphrey Bourne, a Stafford innkeeper and baker. School days were likely spent in Stafford's Free Grammar School which in those days occupied the former St Bertelin's chapel adjoining St Mary's church. Here the young scholar acquired his knowledge of Latin.

In 1610 stepfather Humphrey became tenant of The Swan in the main street. Izaak will have spent little time there as, at the age of 17, he began the seven-year task of learning a craft from a master to whom he was bound apprentice. The master was his wealthy brother-in-law, Thomas Grinsell, whose business was in the City of London.

The apprenticeship was completed successfully. By 1624 Izaak had his own business premises in London, 'on the north-side of Fleet Street in a house two doors west of the end of Chancery Lane'. Initially he shared the premises with a hosier. Izaak himself was a linen draper, a profitable trade in the fashion-conscious capital in an age of sumptuous dress. Some biographers refer to him as an ironmonger but this idea is based on his membership of the Ironmongers Company. Such membership simply indicated that he was a freeman of that particular livery company rather than an actual practitioner of its trade.

The young draper lived in the parish of St Dunstan's-in-the-West. His residence there produced several major factors in his life. In 1624 John Donne, the famous poet, was appointed as vicar of St Dunstan's. Donne would become a powerful influence on Walton's thinking and philosophy.

In December 1626 Izaak married 19-year old Rachel Floud at St Mildred's church in Canterbury. A reminder of the wedding survives to this day in the form of a wooden marriage chest bearing the inscription:

IZAAK WALTON RACHEL FLOUD
JOYNED TOGETHER IN YE HOLIE BONDES OF WEDLOCKE
ON YE 27TH DATE OF DECEMBER A1626D

This oak chest shows the couple's social standing as its elaborate carving and inlay of ebony and box or fruitwood would have made it an expensive piece of furniture.

Rachel and Izaak's family life suffered a great deal of sorrow. They had six sons and one daughter between 1627 and 1640 but lost them all at tragically early ages. The losses came to a climax with another death. Saint Dunstan's parish register duly recorded: '1640. Aug. 25, Rachell, wife of Izaack Walton, buried'.

Despite these bereavements, Izaak played a full part in local community

and parish affairs during his time at St Dunstan's. He served on juries, was a sidesman and a vestryman, and held the posts of constable, overseer for the poor, and scavenger (the latter being responsible for seeing the streets clear of rubbish).

There were other events at this time that were to have longstanding effects on Izaak's life. It was about 1630 that he first met Dr George Morley. The friendship was to last for the rest of their long lives. They began to associate with an intellectual group known as the 'Great Tew circle'. The members, mainly Anglican clergymen, met informally at Great Tew, the Oxfordshire home of Viscount Falkland. The general philosophy of the group was a pronounced sense of community and tolerance; dispute and controversy were to be avoided. But such a way of life was soon threatened and turbulent times lay ahead.

The Civil War broke out in 1642, bringing bloodshed and turmoil as royalist fought parliamentarian. This caused Izaak Walton great distress and he regretted 'that Almighty God hath appointed me to live in an age in which contention increases and charity decays'. The city of London became no place for a staunch royalist and Anglican; he remarked it was 'dangerous for honest men to be there'. Not surprisingly, St Dunstan's parish records tell of a meeting in August 1644 when new vestrymen had to be chosen to fill vacancies caused by, among others, 'Izaak Walton lately departed out of this parish and dwelling elsewhere'. 'Elsewhere' was the safer, more rural, district of Clerkenwell. Here he no longer had to pay the fines and levies imposed in the city to fill Parliament's coffers for the fight against Charles I.

Many of Izaak's friends and acquaintances in the Great Tew group, especially the clergymen, were suffering severe hardship. As the War dragged on and Parliament gained the upper hand, the Anglican Church faced major problems. The churchmen and scholars who refused to accept the new regime were thrown out of their posts. Many served a term of imprisonment after which they went into exile or quiet retirement. A few risked all to try and keep their church alive although it was now virtually an underground organisation.

Even in the darkest days there was some joy for Izaak Walton. On 23 April 1647 he married Ann Ken. The couple had three children. Daughter Anne was born on 11 March 1648; a boy named Isaak was baptised on 10 February 1650 only to be buried in Clerkenwell exactly four months later.

Then came 'my last son Isaac'. He was born on 7 September 1651 and christened in an illicit ceremony the same evening 'in my house at Clerkenwell' by a priest who defied Parliament and administered private congregations.

Usually Izaak managed to live quietly at Clerkenwell but there was a time of extreme personal danger. Charles II's attempt to regain the throne after the execution of his father in 1649 ended on the battlefield of Worcester on 3 September 1651. After a brave effort, the outnumbered royalists were beaten and 2,000 lay dead. Charles himself just managed to escape from the city and initially joined the general flight back towards Scotland.

By the early hours of the next morning the king's group of fugitives had reached White Ladies Priory on the Shropshire/Staffordshire border. Sensing his best chance of survival lay in travelling alone, Charles disguised himself as a humble woodman. His attempt to walk into Wales failed but his luck changed with the opportunity to ride from Staffordshire to Bristol as 'groom' to Mistress Jane Lane of Bentley Hall. Although a known royalist, she had been given a pass to travel to Bristol to visit a sick friend.

The king's initial disguise as a woodman meant he had to dispose of his 'Lesser George', the diamond-studded medallion of the Order of the Garter which hung around his neck. This jewel was entrusted to a senior officer, Colonel Thomas Blague, for safekeeping. Blague and the rest of the royal escort party continued their ride north in the futile bid to reach safety in Scotland. Cromwell's forces were all around and many of the group were captured in a skirmish near Newport. Blague and a few others managed to evade their pursuers. Eventually the colonel reached the isolated Blore Pipe farm beside the River Sow in north-west Staffordshire. Luckily farmer Barlow and his wife were royalist supporters and Blague was able to hide the Lesser George. Not a moment too soon as the Roundheads were closing in and capture was inevitable. Blague was taken first to Stafford then on to the Tower of London. The colonel had a problem: he was a prisoner in London and the king's jewel was 150 miles away. Royalist agents picked up the mission and Stafford lawyer Robert Milward retrieved the George from its hiding place. He handed it to someone familiar with travelling the road from Stafford to London - Izaak Walton. Once back in the capital, Izaak delivered the precious item to Blague's wife who had a pass to visit her husband in the Tower. Shortly afterwards Blague escaped from custody, found a ship for France and was able to restore the George

to its rightful owner, Charles II, now safely back in exile.

The mission was successful but at no small risk to those who took part. Within days of the Battle of Worcester, Parliament had announced a £1,000 reward for the apprehension of the fugitive king, 'his adherents and abettors'. Although no-one betrayed Charles for the reward, two men who had taken part in the early stages of his escape were arrested and executed. One false move by Izaak Walton during his three or four day ride to London and he might not have survived to write the book which would bring world-renown.

Twenty months later, in May 1653, the first edition of *The Compleat Angler* was published. There is a intriguing echo of the Lesser George episode in the book. Izaak dedicated it to '*the Right Worshipful John Offley of Madeley Manor in the county of Stafford, Esquire, my most honoured friend*'. The pair were well acquainted, even fishing Madeley pond together. John Offley had been imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1650 for 'holding correspondence with enemies of the Commonwealth'. So he was there when Colonel Blague was brought in after his capture at Blore Pipe. It has to be more than coincidence that the Lesser George was retrieved from Staffordshire by Offley's friend, Izaak Walton. The links with Charles II's escape don't end there. John Offley was allowed to have his wife Mary keep him company in the Tower ... Mary had a first cousin, the very same Jane Lane who helped the king reach Bristol.

Even in his later years Izaak was a fairly frequent traveller back to his home county. In May 1655 he consolidated his links by purchasing Halfhead Farm close to the hamlet of Shallowford, four or five miles beyond Stafford. He acquired the farm buildings, barns, stables, garden, courtyard and nine fields for the sum of £350. However he had no intention of taking up farming himself. The property came with a tenant farmer and Izaak was happy to let this arrangement continue.

A mystery arises. Izaak's close friend George Morley had been expelled from his post as canon at Christ Church, Oxford in March 1648. He is reputed to have spent the next year sheltering with the Walton family before leaving for France in May 1649 to join the exiled Charles II. Much of the time was reputedly spent at Izaak's Staffordshire retreat. Walton biographer W.L. Bowles heard the story at first hand from Izaak's last direct descendant. An illustration drawn specifically for the biography in the 1820s

clearly depicts Halfhead Farm - but Izaak did not buy this property until 1655!

The surviving purchase documents may solve the puzzle. In these Izaak is described as 'of Worston farm'. This was the farm adjoining Halfhead and clues show it being owned or at least occupied by a Mr Roe. Robert Roe was a well-known friend and fishing companion of Izaak at that period. So it would have been at Worston rather than Halfhead where Morley is said to have spent his time before joining the exiled king.

1660 brought the Restoration of the Monarchy and the return to England of Charles and his supporters. Among them was George Morley, who, as soon as he was reinstated at Christ Church, appointed Izaak as his business agent. Within a few weeks Morley was rewarded for his long services to the Church with the appointment as Bishop of Worcester. Izaak, albeit now 67 years old, accepted the post of bishop's steward and moved with his family to Worcester. It was here that his second wife Anne died in April 1662 and was buried in the Cathedral.

In that same year George Morley became Bishop of Winchester. He again offered the post of steward to Izaak who, accompanied by daughter Anne and son Isaac, duly took up residence in Winchester.

Izaak was still a regular visitor to his home county. There were trips to his farm near Shallowford or fishing expeditions on the River Dove with another close friend, Charles Cotton. His hometown of Stafford remained in his thoughts. In 1672, for example, he advised and assisted the Corporation in charitable projects. He donated £22 to build a wall around St Chad's churchyard and the rent from a garden he owned near the gaol was used for its maintenance. There is a very personal reminder of a visit to Halfhead one August day in 1676 when he sat down and assessed the value of his nine fields. The notes, in his own handwriting, include his thoughts on how many loads of hay some of the meadows should yield.

Izaak spent most of his final years between Winchester Cathedral, the Bishop's main residence at Farnham Castle or London townhouse in Chelsea, and the home of daughter Anne and her husband Dr William Hawkins in the Cathedral Close at Winchester. It was in Dr Hawkins's house that Izaak Walton died, aged 90, on 15 December 1683. He was laid to rest in the Cathedral.

Among the items listed in the probate inventory of his possessions were 'apparel, linen and woollens - £10, gold and silver money - £29, a horse - £5', and, appropriately, 'fishing tackle and other lumber - £10'.

Izaak Walton's will decreed that two properties he owned in London were to go to his daughter and son-in-law. Son Isaac was given Norrington Farm in Hampshire, and Halfhead Farm. The later had a condition however. If Isaac didn't marry before the age of 41 the farm would go to the corporation of Stafford and the annual rent be used for charitable purposes for poor people of the town. This condition came into force in 1694 and Izaak's generosity helped Staffordians for many generations. Each year two boys from poor families were apprenticed to learn a trade; a maid or young girl was given £1 on her wedding day; and £5-10s-0d was used to buy coal for the needy during the winter.

His hometown had been remembered with his kindness and generosity. Stafford in turn remembered Izaak when a memorial bust was unveiled in St Mary's church in 1878. Much more recently a statue was erected on the bank of the Sow as it runs through Victoria Park. A fitting spot for the river must have featured heavily in his boyhood days in the town - did he fish for tiddlers during his summer holidays? And by a curious coincidence, although he was by then long since a Londoner, the two main episodes of Civil War drama in Izaak's life were played out right beside the Sow - the Lesser George episode which began at Blore Pipe and the sheltering of George Morley at Worston.