

An Account of the Easter Rising of 1645 In South Brent during the Civil War

Written by Peter M. Synge



The Memorial in St. Michael's Church Brent Knoll

to

JOHN SOMERSET, Gentleman
Died January 8th 1663

£1

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in South Brent during the Civil War
written by Peter M. Synge – 1980**

Any visitor to St. Michael's Church, Brent Knoll is certain to turn his or her eyes almost at once to the magnificent life-sized memorial to John Somerset, Gentleman, built into the south wall.

Some will think it is a terrible eyesore in a country church, some have described it as 'fantastic', but most will regard it with awe and admiration and will want to know more about the man. Was he a celebrated soldier as his martial air suggests or was he just a local landowner with an exaggerated sense of his own importance? Did he design the memorial himself as has been somewhat maliciously suggested or was he so much beloved by his widow, his friends and the people of South Brent that they all contributed to this almost unique monument? Nobody knows for certain.

The Parish records of the times have been lost, but in the County Library at Taunton there exists a volume of the proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological & Natural History Society which incorporates an article by Henry Symonds F.S.A. attached to which were copies of documents relating to the trial of John Somerset and Thomas Gilling for allegedly inciting a revolt against Royalist troops quartered in South Brent on Good Friday, April 4th 1645, and it is from these papers the writer has compiled the following narrative.

On March 24th 1645, which by the old calendar was New Year's Eve, a body of about 60 cavalry, in the service of King Charles I and marching from Bristol to Taunton under the command of Lt. Col. W. Ayscough, quartered themselves on the inhabitants of South Brent and stayed there for eleven days, pillaging and plundering the villagers not only of South Brent, but also of Berrow, Lympsham, East Brent and Burnham. At the time the Royalists still held almost the whole of Somerset, though Taunton itself was a Cromwellian stronghold and was being besieged by General Lord Goring. Bridgwater and its castle were held for the King by Col. Edmund Windham, and Bristol Castle and city were held for the King by Sir Ralph (later Lord) Hopton who had been appointed Lieutenant-Governor of Bristol and Commander-in-Chief of all troops in Somerset.

Under the circumstances one would imagine that this troop of cavalry would have been urgently needed by General Goring in his siege of Taunton, but Lt. Col. Ayscough appears to have handed over the command to Lt. Tynte who allowed them to roam about the area breaking into houses and forcibly taking away horses, beans, oats, linen and woollens, demanding with menaces and generally treating inhabitants as if they were the enemy, when in fact they were staunch supporters of the King up till this time. On March 31st an order arrived from Sir Ralph Hopton for the troops to proceed at once to Taunton, but this was ignored and the pillaging continued. It seems likely that Lt. Col. Ayscough had quartered himself on John Somerset who was the most notable Gentleman in the district, and he may well have been so well entertained that he had no wish to leave the place, but the fact remains that he disappears from the scene and is not mentioned again.

John Somerset had been given a limited Commission with the honorary rank of Captain by Col. Windham in January of that year and was permitted to arrest any idle soldier guilty of plunder and send him under guard to Bristol for trial. Obviously Capt. Somerset was powerless to take any action against such a large body of troops, and he was in a very difficult position if their commanding officer was lodging with him.

The first recorded incident in the case against Capt. Somerset occurred on the day after the arrival of the troops at South Brent, that is to say New Year's Day – March 25th. This was in Axbridge where a Fair was being held and Capt. Somerset was there drinking in the King's

Head Alehouse when an uproar in the street occurred involving a trooper named Williams and a man named Rogers of Cheddar who was later claimed to be a servant of Capt. Somerset. This incident is of little interest to the present story except that the King's Head Alehouse is the heavily timbered 15th century house now known as King John's Hunting Lodge (which it never was, being some 200 years younger than the reign of King John) and which now houses the Axbridge Museum; and that one Anthony Isgar, Yeoman of Axbridge, deposed that Capt. Somerset remained in the King's Head and never came near the brawl. This Anthony Isgar must have been an ancestor of the present family of Isgar now living in Mark.

No further incident is recorded until Friday 4th April when the unfortunate inhabitants of South Brent, and perhaps some of the outraged inhabitants of the other villages, rose against the troops and a serious fight took place in which a Lt. Browne was wounded in the thigh 'with a musket ball and seven small shot'. This Lt. Browne appealed to Thomas Gilling for protection in his house but Gilling refused to give his protection and told him 'begonn, begonn'.

As the result of this insurrection another troop of horses under Lt. Col. Bovill arrived in the village, arrested Capt. Somerset and Thomas Gilling and took them to Bristol Goal where they remained for four or five weeks charged with inciting the population to revolt against the troops of His Majesty King Charles I.

Here should be mentioned the curious case of Philip Creech who was also arrested and sent to Bristol for trial. This man lived in Charlton Mackrell and happened to be staying with his kinsman Capt. Somerset on the day of the rising and in his 'humble petition' to Lord Hopton he complains that he has been in prison in Bristol for about a month in spite of the fact that he was a stranger to South Brent and took no part in the rising, and that 'hath by a space of almost two years continued upon His Majesty's service and hath adventured his life in divers engagements therein'. In Creech's defence a certain Richard Swayne, husbandman, of South Brent deposed that on the day of the rising he was going with Creech from Capt. Somerset's house, situated at Low Ham, along the causeway leading to East Brent when they came upon ten men with pikes and staves in their hands, 'who examined Philip Creech whether he was a soldier to Col. Tynte and he answering "No" we passed

together to East Brent, and afterwards we heard that there was an insurrection in South Brent and we both returned to South Brent, the one to Capt. Somerset's house and the other to his father's house'. But nevertheless Creech was later accused of being one of the men who led the insurrection in South Brent.

In another document a certain Thomas Moore, Yeoman of South Brent, 'deposeth and saith that on the 4th day of April last past some of the inhabitants of Lympham came to South Brent after some troopers, under Capt. Pauling, had been at Lympham plundering of horses and mares and other things, and thereupon there was great fighting and violence between the said inhabitants of Lympham and some of Mark, and Thomas Gilling laboured to pacify them and continued very earnest to appease the difference until some of his neighbours came and told him that his house was likely to be set on fire, at which the said Mr. Gilling went home to his own house and came no more among them. And this deponent heard Mr. Henry Tynte, Lt. to Capt. Pauling, divers times to speak very foul words both of Mr. Gilling and his wife and to say that he would do them some mischief before he went away. And further deposeth that he, this deponent, and Capt. John Somerset were on the day aforesaid, being Good Friday, at Evening Prayer together and that afterwards the said Mr. Somerset went home to his own house and neither he or Philip Creech were in the meeting or insurrection aforesaid as far as he saw or ever heard'.

Now we come to the full case for the defence of John Somerset and Thomas Gilling which, for the purpose of this narrative has been transcribed and some what shortened: -

"Mr. John Somerset and Mr. Thomas Gilling, the truth of the cause, were in prison in the custody of the Marshal of Bristol for the rising of a pretended tumult and insurrection on Lt. Col. Ayscough and others of Col. Tynte's regiment. That Lt. Col. Ayscough, Capt. Palden, Capt. Lancaster, Lt. Tynte and his brother Mr. Workeman, William Wallen, William Weekes, then Quarter Master, and about three score others all horsemen, came to South Brent on March 24th and were quartered there until April 4th, and that twenty of that Regiment was quartered there for some time not above twelve or fourteen days before. That some of them forcibly entered the house of John Joanes and took from him 25s. That William Weekes and others on the 29th March last did break open the house of Steven Cocke and took from

him 12 bushels of malt, 6 yards of home made cloth and broke up all the chests and locks in his house.

That Henry Salisbury and others of that Company broke up the house of Maude Blake and took from her a piece of broad cloth and linen. That Francis Swift, Richard Hutchings and John Parsons, being quartered with Henry Simons of South Brent, on March 25th took by force a fat bullock from John Grabham's man coming from the fair and delivered him to one Philips, Simon's servant, and charged him to look to him at his peril, but the bullock being that night taken away by the owners the troops did grievously beat and cut the said Philips and set a sword to the breast of Simon's wife and threatened to run her through if she would not fetch a rope to hang the man, and having a rope they put it about the neck of Philips using many oaths that they would hang him, they forced him to give them 20s. to appease their fury. That they took from the inhabitants of South Brent, East Brent and Burnham while they were quartered there 20 mares and horses. That some of them robbed John Gilling, a butcher, coming from Axbridge market and took from him his purse and money. That William Weekes sent a warrant to the Tythingham to bring in three quarters of beans or oats or money on pain of plunder, of which the Tythingham brought him 6 bushels and 5s in money, but a short time after Weekes, Capt. Palden and 50 others came to the Tythingham's father's house and threatened to tie him neck and heels together if he brought them not 40s the next morning, and he brought them the greatest part and yet they were not satisfied. That Lt. Tynte did often say that the country people were fools and that they were good for nothing but to be made idiots, and that Mr. Workeman of that Company took from Nicholas Palecy his purse and his money in his own house which was 10s or more, that some of them took 3 lambs and one sheep from Willy Filtham, and that Mr. Workeman of that Company said to some Irish of that Company it would never be well until they killed women and children. That some of them proffered to sell Vicar Willmot's wheat to an Ale Seller for 12 pence the bushel. That some of them said they would save Mr. Cox the labour of collecting any more contribution money and they hoped to lighten of what he had collected ere long. That all these misdemeanours of the soldiers were committed before the people opposed them, besides at the instant of time the soldiers were plundering Lympsham and other places, which so far incensed the people that the County rose on them of their own accord, having a warrant from the Right Honourable Lord Hopton dated 21st January last to apprehend all plunderers and to convey them to the Garrison at

Bristol, and likewise another warrant from the Right Worshipful Mr. Edmond Windham of Bridgwater to oppose all soldiers that should come in any violent manner or plunder any goods, and apprehend them.

That neither Somerset nor Gilling were privy to the rising, of which the inhabitants certify. That Somerset and Gilling have ever been loyal subjects to the King, the Commissioners certificates do show. That notwithstanding, one Col. Bovill and his Company did apprehend and take the said Somerset and Gilling prisoners and kept them for a long time in the custody of the Provost Marshal pretending that they were the chief actors in the rising of the people, for which pretence Colonels Bovill and Ayscough hath plundered them already, viz. Somerset to the value of £100 and Gilling to the value of £50. That since the opposing, the inhabitants of South Brent were plundered by Colonels Bovill's and Ayscough's men to the value of £300. Besides, Col. Bovill fined each Hamlet some £30 apiece”.

The trial of Somerset and Gilling was delayed for some two months because Lord Hopton had apparently been summoned to attend the Prince of Wales (afterwards King Charles II) at Exeter, and while there the Royalists were greatly alarmed by the advance of the Cromwellian General Fairfax through Dorset to the eastern borders of Somerset. And, in fact, there never was a trial and both Somerset and Gilling were released on bail in the sum of £500 and bound over to be good behaviour. However, the plundering by the soldiers continued and both men continued to petition His Majesty's Commissioners for the County of Somerset for the restitution of the horses, arms and goods which they had lost, and a long list of the losses of some 21 other inhabitants was sent to the Commissioners, amounting to a total £255 – a very great amount of money in those days – and the total amount of the claims from East Brent, South Brent, Lympsham, Berrow and Burnham amounted to £687-17-2d which was very probably never recovered owing to the poverty of the Royal Exchequer at the time, and to the disasters which befell the Royalists in July 1645, when first Langport and then Bridgwater fell to Gen. Fairfax, and King Charles I faced total defeat.

It is not easy to assess in today's values the losses suffered by the people of the five villages concerned, but included in the total were 26 horses and mares valued at between £2-10-0d and £5 each. We

must realise that a horse or mare was the sole means of transport and of work in the fields, and so the value of each to its owner was quite considerable. The total losses were valued at £688, a figure which would run into thousands of pounds in today's money -a very large loss indeed to the 82 villagers who suffered from the plundering of their belongings. The names of those whose houses were plundered, who must have been people of some substance such as farmers, professional men and, no doubt, a blacksmith and a butcher and other tradesmen, are listed in the petitions but are not identified, nor are the houses in which they lived. This is perhaps understandable in the days when there was no postal service and the majority were illiterate. Thus there was no need to give a house a name, and if a stranger came to a village and asked for a particular person everybody would know where he lived and could direct him.

John Somerset's house too was unnamed, but we know that when it was rebuilt about a century later, it was named Somerset Court which name it has retained to this day except that from 1940 to 1964 it was a preparatory school for boys owned and run by the late Mr. John Matthews whose school of that name was evacuated from Eastbourne because of the danger from enemy bombing and shelling on the South Coast. Today it is a home for people suffering from autism.

A petition to Lord Hopton from the inhabitants of South Brent asking for clemency for Somerset and Gilling to which was appended the names of some 56 inhabitants of the village is among the papers from which this record is taken, and it was hoped that many of them would be identified as ancestors of the present older inhabitants of Brent Knoll, but only two, those of Cary and Cox, are known there today.

However, in a similar list of petitioners from Lympsham occur the well-known names in the district of Champion, Puddy, Priddy and Bible (Dibble?)

The figure of Thomas Gilling is a somewhat shadowy one who may have been John Somerset's Agent or Factor. We do not know where he lived, but we do know that his wife's name was Joane (as was also Somerset's wife) from a charming letter written by Somerset from prison in Bristol and signed by both men and addressed to "Our loving wives". It goes on "Our hearty loves remembered, we received your letter April 23 dated April 22 wherein we find that lying goes on

but I doubt not but God will protect us..... I would have my wife Joane Somerset present the partridges, that are left, to the Governor of Bridgwater being the Prince is there. I would have Willi Venn to handle my sheep and sent me word how they are. I would likewise have you go on with the ploughing and husbandry according to the time of year; pray send me word what mares I have left. If you can prevail at Bridgwater send us word as soon as maybe; you must likewise pay the messenger Rich Verbie, a man which we think very fit to carry a letter for you at any time; we would likewise have you be merry and comfort yourselves with what is left and drink a cup of sack as we do here. Trusting in God, who we make no doubt but will deliver us shortly, so with our loves remember unto you both with our family and servants and the rest of our good friends, in haste we rest and remain your loving husbands to the end.”

John Somerset and Thomas Gilling.

As previously mentioned these two men were released on bail early in May, whether as the result of their own petition to Lord Hopton and the Prince of Wales, or the separate petitions from 12 men from East Brent, 14 from Burnham, 27 from Berrow and 56 from South Brent, or representations from Sir Edward Rodney of Rodney Stoke who was a friend of Somerset, is not known, nor is it known whether any actual trial was held or any compensation paid for the losses suffered by the villagers but the latter is very unlikely. What is known is that when during the third week in July of the same year when Fairfax's New Model Army had defeated the Royalists at Langport and were pursuing Lord Goring's defeated armies through the Somerset Levels "the countrymen thereabouts that had been vexed with the Cavaliers, hearing of the defeat given unto them and fearing a taste of their former cruelties, rose in great numbers and with their colours, clubs and arms appeared upon Knoll Hill, which being made known to General Fairfax, he with Lieutenant General (Oliver Cromwell) and other officers, marched up to them, who seemingly received him with joy and in token thereof gave him a volley of shot”.

Fairfax, wiser than his opponents, pacified the clubmen by undertaking to pay for all provisions and to punish plunderers, on condition that stores were not to be supplied to the Royalists in Bridgwater.

This is not the end of the story, for when the Civil War ended John Somerset became the prey of the Parliamentary Committee for

compounding, which body seized his estate on the grounds that he that he had “ formerly acted as Captain for the King, pressing men and levying money”. This must have been a bitter blow to him coming on top of all his other losses, (which must have amounted to several thousands of pounds in today’s values) in the services of the Royalists.

However, he begged for relief and was eventually discharged under an Act of Pardon granted on 14th April 1653.

The reader will no doubt be wondering what sort of a man John Somerset was, as, although he was accused of inciting the rising he is not recorded as doing anything at all. Well, it is evident that he was no great soldier, no valiant man at arms and no great hero, but a simple country gentleman who was held in high esteem by the people of the district. In contrast to the impression gained from studying his flamboyant memorial, he was a gentle man, devoted to his family and friends and God-fearing. He was almost certainly a generous benefactor to St. Michael’s as otherwise the Church authorities would not have allowed his memorial to be erected in such a prominent position, and in fact one of the ring of six bells in the tower was donated by him. Mr. Willmott, the vicar at the time, was one of the signatories of the petition sent to Bristol by the people of South Brent protesting his innocence, and doubtless these lines of rhymed epitaph beneath his effigy are true: -

“his hopeful offspring ordered hence
to heaven in their baptismal innocence.
The needy here on earth he chose to be
his care, even his adopted progeny”.

John Somerset must have been a fairly wealthy man and a large landowner, but he was not Lord of the Manor of South Brent though his land almost certainly included the southern slopes of the Knoll, as we know he owned sheep which could only be grazed on higher ground than the low lying moors. There is no evidence that he was related to the ancestors of the Dukes of Beaufort whose family name is Somerset, but his family pedigree was registered at the “Herald’s Visitation of 1573”.

Of Thomas Gilling we only know that he died on 1st June 1667 and was buried in St. Michael’s churchyard, together with his wife, Joane, who had died two years or more earlier. The headstone of their grave now stands just outside the clergy vestry door on the south side

of the church. It was cleaned in 1980 by a 93 year old lady, Mrs. Williams, who lived at the bottom of Church Lane and who spent many hours diligently scrubbing away the growth of moss and lichen that obscured the lettering. The inscription is an excellent example of C17th language and a little of it may still just be legible by visitors to the church.

A study of John Somerset's memorial shows that probably the young lady on his right was his first wife and mother of the four children shown in the panel below. It may be deduced that she died soon after the birth of the baby shown in swaddling clothes—possible in child birth – and that John then married the lady on his left, who was “loving wife Joane” of the letter, here shown in widow's weeds, and who survived him and was responsible for the extravagant memorial. This is of course pure conjecture, as no other record of the two ladies exists.

The present colouring of the memorial was done in 1963 with great care and skill by Mr. Clyde Lewis of Burnham-on-Sea; who spent many hours on this work. He was able to find enough of the previous colouring remaining, even if only a trace, to reconstitute it virtually as it had been. He also repaired the plaster where it had been chipped in the course of time.

The people of Brent Knoll owe Mr. Lewis a great debt of gratitude for his work, which he did entirely for love.

Other similar memorials in Somerset

In St. Leonard's Church, Rodney Stoke, on the A371 between Cheddar and Wells, there exists what is known as the Rodney Chapel on the north side of the chancel. In it is a memorial to Sir Edward and Lady Rodney, which is quite obviously by the same craftsman though smaller in size and less extravagant in design. Sir Edward died in 1657 and all his 13 children had pre-deceased him so the family died out, with the inevitable result that the memorial has fallen into decay. It is a case of "out of sight out of mind" as it is not visible from the nave or chancel, but it deserves to be preserved as an example of a craftsman's art in the 17th century.

In Axbridge Parish Church there is a memorial to Anne Prowse built into the east wall of the south aisle which very closely resembles the John Somerset memorial in design and is obviously by the same craftsman. The name of the craftsman is not recorded anywhere, but it is quite possible that it was George Drayton who was a local craftsman in plaster work and who executed the nave ceiling, for which he was paid the princely sum of ten guineas!

He also did similar work in East Brent Church at about the same time. It seems unlikely that there was more than one such exquisitely talented craftsman operating in rural Somerset around the middle of the 17th century, when plaster work was in its infancy in England, so it is not unreasonable to attribute these three memorials to George Drayton.

The proceeds of the sale of this booklet will be devoted to Church Funds

Originally printed and published by Duprint, Burnham-on-Sea
October 1980

Revised and re-printed on behalf of the Parochial Church Council
April 1995 and August 2000

Reset in Arial 12point using Microsoft® Word97® by George Frost
April 2007

In Memory of John Somersett Gent who
died the 8th day of January 1663
His Countie gave him name, and s name express
In what his Ancestors and s Selfe were blest,
hence his first yeares the best Improvements knew
which happily what s great and good pursue,
nor did his thinking Age shame his first Yeares,
he knew noe meane delight, noe sordid cares,
in short, his hopefull of spring orderd hence
to Heav'n, in theire Baptistmal innocence,
the needy here on Earth he chose to be
his care, evn his adopted Progenie,
such were his thoughts, and thus his Actions stroue
while he remaind below to live above,
and when sh' Almighty found him fit for blifs
he calld him to his proper happines