

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### **Tony Diamond, Magic, Mystery and Blood – the life of Oliver Cromwell**

Tony Diamond described Oliver Cromwell as 'one of the greatest Englishmen who had ever lived' while speaking to the January meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. He engaged his audience in a talk which combined humour with detailed knowledge. He emphasized that Cromwell is a controversial figure, a demon to some but the 'saviour of Christianity' to others. His life was truly surrounded by 'magic, mystery and blood.'

Cromwell was born in Huntingdon on 25 April 1599. It is claimed that Cromwell bloodied the nose of the three year old Prince Charles when they met at his grandfather's house, Hinchbrooke House, in 1603. Their paths would cross again.

In 1616 Cromwell went to Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge which was a Puritan College. While studying there in its very religious atmosphere, Cromwell is reported to have had a vision that 3 September would be an important day for him. This was dangerous as it could have been interpreted as dabbling in witchcraft.

Cromwell moved to a house in Ely in 1625 and by 1640, as MP for Cambridge, he was a prominent opponent of Charles I and his insistence on the Divine Right of Kings. This degenerated into the Civil War which Tony Diamond characterised as a conflict between Anglicans and Puritans. Cromwell distinguished himself as a military leader and is credited with founding the modern British Army.

Charles I was captured in 1647 and tried at Westminster Hall. Cromwell organised the trial and signed the King's death warrant but was not a judge. After the execution in 1649, Charles was buried without ceremony in St George's Chapel, Windsor in a tomb which contained the bodies of Henry VIII and Jane Seymour.

Ireland now became the focus for Cromwell's attention. It had been lawless throughout the 1640s and posed a threat to Britain's security. Cromwell began a bloody repression which still fuels hatred of him to this day with the massacre of the people of Drogheda on 3 September 1649. It was followed with further slaughter at Wexford and the subsequent selling of Irish women, the 'Wild Swans,' to plantation owners in the West Indies to breed slaves. Ireland was forced into submission.

Cromwell next pacified Scotland when he defeated a much larger force at Dunbar on 3 September 1650. Charles II fled into England but was defeated by Cromwell at Worcester on 3 September 1651. Cromwell was now master of the British Isles. He dissolved Parliament and ruled as Lord Protector until his sudden death on 3 September 1658. He had a state funeral and was interred at Westminster Abbey.

After his restoration in 1660, Charles II wanted revenge and so on the anniversary of his father's execution in 1661, Cromwell's body was exhumed, and then hung, drawn and quartered. The body is thought to have been buried at Tyburn, modern day Marble Arch, but the head was put on spike and displayed in the portico of the House of Lords for the next 25 years. The head briefly reappeared in 1710 and 1799, before being shown to a surprised public in 1935 by a distant relative, Horace Wilkinson, who was Vicar of Bredfield in Suffolk. In 1960 it was passed to Sidney Sussex College where it was authenticated and later buried in the College grounds.

Even today, Cromwell provokes controversy. The Cromwell Society post a notice in The Times to celebrate his birthday but the Sealed Knot Society post a counter notice in the same newspaper to celebrate the anniversary of his death.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 25 February at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP22 1HD when Pip Wright will give a talk about a Suffolk farming family. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, [www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net).

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