

THOMAS STRETE was instituted to the vicarage of St. Mary's on August 11th, 1528, and he retained his position until 1571. He must indeed have witnessed the most remarkable changes in Bridgwater. He served under four sovereigns : Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary, and Elizabeth ; he was there when mediaeval religious customs were in full power and possession ; he lived to see them all swept away. There was grumbling and muttering in various quarters as to certain prevalent abuses, even at the time when he was instituted, but no one could have foretold what was coming. The mills had been grinding slowly for years ; at the end their speed was vastly accelerated, and they ground swiftly and exceeding small. It is nearly always so in all great movements. The pent-up forces seek an outlet, and tarry long. Then comes the opportunity. In England the opportunity arrived with the King's personal quarrel with the Pope. That was the fulcrum on which the lever rested; all else was but contributory. Thus Thomas Strete served quietly in his parish, as a young man, during the Reformation Parliament (from 1529 to 1536), which legalized the changes which the King had in view ; he saw the Friars and the Augustinian Canons turned out in 1539; he saw no more of the chantry priests after 1548. The Cannington nuns no longer walked about the streets; Athelney, Glastonbury, and all the great religious houses had gone. He lost many a friend, one may be sure, in those saddening times. He must have been continually in contact with the Brotherhood at St. John's Hospital in Eastover ; and the Friars, of course, were always in evidence in the town. The chaplains and chantry priests he met every day, and he must have known them intimately every one. How utterly desolate the Bridgwater streets must presently have seemed to the poor vicar ! How, when he officiated at the services in his church — it is not clear whether he had an assistant or not — he must have missed the Masses, the obits, the trentalls, the anniversaries, the bright altars gleaming in the transepts and chapels, the lamps and the lights of a few years ago ! His fellow-priests all gone ; St. Mary's now the only church left within the town, for the others had been desecrated and sold or given to those who chanced to be in power and in favour then. It was trying to many people ; devout and good people too, as we know from the letters and memories of those times ; it must have been grievously trying to Thomas Strete.

William Pole's *chappelle of St. Salviour*,

which Leland noticed in his visit to the town, near to the south gate, had disappeared ; the oratory at Ham, which was an offshoot of Athelney Abbey, had ceased to be. The Lepers' Hospital of St. Giles, also noticed by Leland, had passed out of activity ; Idstock Free Chapel was dismantled and unused. But perhaps the most striking and terrible proof to those who loved the old order of things was the mutilated quarter of the body of Abbot Whiting of Glastonbury, which, when the great abbey was seized, was brought to Bridgwater in a cart and stuck up contemptuously upon the east gate, close by where the Queen's Head Inn now stands. That grim relic was an instance and example to men of the foul deeds done by the emissaries of Henry's agents, who had no scruples and no conscience. Whiting was a lord of Parliament, and a man wholly devoted to his abbey and its work. Upon a preposterous charge of having stolen some of the sacred vessels of his own Benedictine house, he was condemned to death, and was barbarously murdered on Glastonbury Tor. History has shown to us that he was innocent of all save his enthusiasm for the old faith, yet the old man of eighty years was not spared. It was a horrible incident even in that day of horrors. People knew when they looked up at the east gate, that a new era had indeed come. But O, the pity of it all ! They might have pensioned the abbot with some trifle out of the vast spoils of their robbery ; they might have saved the splendid abbey for other generations to see ! But other counsels prevailed ; the comely place was dismantled, and the contents were sold. The meagre ruins which remain even yet call forth the admiration of the visitor; they give a hint and a suggestion of what the place once was.

Yet there were vast compensations. Had there not been some widely-felt desire for reformations, even Henry VIII could hardly have done all that he did. His greatest service of all was that he rid England of every shred of Papal domination. The new Prayer Books appeared; the services were rendered in the English language, they were simplified and made more edifying for popular use. The Mass was altered to the Communion Office; the Bible was made more accessible ; it was ordered that Erasmus' paraphrase of the New Testament should be placed beside the Bible in every parish church. There was a tendency, mainly owing to foreign influence, that change and alteration would be pressed too far, notably in Edward VI's reign. This, however, was checked by the violent reaction

which ensued in Queen Mary's time, and which will always be remembered by reason of the terrible religious persecutions which disgraced that period. It was not until Elizabeth's long reign set in that peace was ultimately restored, slowly and deliberately, and the more sober elements of the Reformation were quietly allowed to bear fruit. Bishop Barlow, who held the see of Bath and Wells, was obliged to flee the country owing to the Marian persecution, but he returned in time to be one of the consecrators of Archbishop Parker in 1559, under whose primacy the Elizabethan religious settlement was mainly effected. Meanwhile Gilbert Bourne had entered upon Barlow's see at Wells, and Barlow, upon his return to England in quieter times, was made Bishop of Chichester. In 1559 the second Prayer Book of Edward VI, with some alterations, was accepted by Parliament, and was incorporated into an Act of Uniformity. Only 189 of the clergy refused to accept it. The last great Papal blow at an English sovereign was attempted by Pope Pius V in 1570, when he excommunicated Queen Elizabeth, and absolved her subjects from their allegiance. It was a bold and clever bid for power, but it failed. Three and a half centuries earlier Innocent III had excommunicated King John, and had, after a long struggle, brought the wily Plantagenet prince to his knees. But things had greatly changed since then. If Pius V needed a test case, he had it. There was a Papal party remaining in England, active and watching. But the Pope's thunderbolt fell harmless, and added nothing to his power. His Bull declared Elizabeth to be an illegitimate usurper, who had tried to destroy Catholic faith and practice ; it declared her to be *ipso facto* deprived of her throne, and her subjects liable to excommunication if they continued to obey her. One enthusiastic servant of Rome had the audacity to affix a copy of the document upon the door of the Bishop of London's palace. But he was arrested, and was executed as a traitor to the Queen. The great question was settled at last ; Rome's power in England was mortally wounded. The Bull, instead of injuring the Queen, caused her people to rally around her with greater zeal.

A year after this Thomas Strete the vicar died. He had had a long vicariate of forty-three years, and so crowded with events and with fateful changes that the experiences of no vicar of Bridgwater, before or since, could ever compare with his. He came to his benefice when the Reformation struggle,

outwardly, was only dawning. He left it when the reforming principles were accepted and settled. The services in the parish church were changed in his time from the full pomp and ceremony of the old religion to the simpler and more edifying modes of worship of that same religion reformed in its practices and purified from its abuses. The ceremonial change was great ; the doctrinal change, which was a reversion to far more ancient and pure principles of the Faith, was necessary. He must have been a brave man to bear it all ; to pass from the waning splendour of the old to the simpler and truer beauty of the new ; from customs and services which as a child he had been taught and had learned to love, to the Book of Common Prayer as set forth by the ablest minds of the realm. If he had been able to write down all that he saw and did, his book would be one of the most valuable treasures that Bridgwater could possess. Had he lived but three years longer he would have used the same Elizabethan chalice which is used in St. Mary's Church to-day (it was provided by Archbishop Parker's order in 1574), and our link with the pre-Reformation time would have been, in that detail, absolutely complete. He found his church brilliant and ornate with the most costly and beautiful ornaments and decoration which that period could provide ; he left it exquisitely beautiful still, but putting on a newer mantle of simplicity. If ever parish priest lived and toiled through an age of transition, violent, painful, distressing at times, yet hopeful in its ultimate issue, Thomas Strete was that man.

Other changes followed. In 1596 an order was made by John and Alexander Popham, George Sydenham and seven other justices named, at the Bridgwater sessions, that no church-ale, clerks-ale, bid-ale, or tipping be suffered, and that such only be suffered to tittle as be or shall be lawfully licensed according to the orders made at those sessions. These ales had been a cause of trouble for some time. They originated in quite early times, and are frequently referred to in the visitations of ecclesiastical authorities. People who were in financial straits would hold a bid-ale (*biddan* to beg), which was a species of revel where ale was sold at a profit, and frequently a collection of money was made. Bride-ales were favourite means of starting newly-married couples on their domestic career. Church-ales were gatherings of a kindred nature, where conviviality, sometimes of a rather boisterous sort, was indulged in, and the profits of the

entertainment were devoted to some Church purpose. A church in Berkshire in 1449 records in its books a payment of four-pence *for making the church clean against the day of drinking in the said church*. This may have been an extreme case. But one of the Canons of 1603 directs that the church-wardens shall permit no plays, feasts, banquets, or church-ale drinkings to be kept in the church, chapel, or churchyard. That such a mandate was made shows that there was need for reform, and that — as indeed is very well known — grave irregularities had accompanied the celebration of these quasi-social, quasi-religious assemblies.

Social changes are hard to follow, and especially in so complicated a movement as the English Reformation. Beyond all doubt, the poor suffered most grievously after the dissolution of the religious houses. St. John's Hospital in Eastover did good work for the poor and the infirm ; nothing took its place. The Friars had done their share of such ministrations, and no body of men has replaced them from that day to this. St. Mary's Church had at least ten priests working in connection with its various organizations, and most of these were channels of what we should now call poor relief. Even the mediaeval funeral was an immense boon to the poor, seeing that the well-to-do would generally direct in their wills that alms should be given to those who would attend their obsequies, and say a prayer for the deceased man's soul. At the obits and anniversaries, too, there was frequently some little gift for the poor. These Church channels of aid to the miserable and the outcast were summarily closed, and great sufferings and privation ensued in consequence. The rich benefited by the suppressions of the monasteries and chantries; the indigent were left lamenting. Of the vast sums of money which fell into the hands of the State and the servants of the State, scarcely any dribbles trickled back into the possession of the needy. This was the appalling blot upon the escutcheon of the Reformation, or rather upon those who rode forth to wage its battles. It squandered its huge wealth; it wasted its precious opportunity; it let the day pass by when it might have founded the most magnificent system of poor-relief that any nation ever possessed.

This sordidness, moreover, brought its dire spiritual consequences. Whatever religious principles might lie underneath the great movement — and no doubt there were

many such — they were soon covered up under a load of purely secular bargainings. It was impossible to destroy such a mass of churches and chapels without harming religion itself. It could hardly promote reverence and godliness to see the lead stripped from church roofs, the contents of abbeys sold to any passer-by, and the sacred vessels and vestments tossed about like the very riff-raff at an auction sale. Reverence is a tender plant, easily bruised. The men who carried out the great spoliations bruised it sorely, with lamentable results. It is not easy to acquire precise knowledge of Elizabethan days, but it is hardly denied that crime and evil increased. How could it do otherwise? The moral restraints of the old system — a system which in spite of all its faults exercised great moral influences — were suddenly removed, and nothing was substituted. Chaplains and priests wandered about, their occupation gone, looking for some post wherein they could earn a morsel of bread. The very bargaining for the spoils was harmful. It suggested that Church property was made to be bandied about. It introduced a haggling spirit which was unlovely. This was the darker side of some Reformation consequences.

There was a gain in another direction, which was that the thoughts of men were less confined in ecclesiastical channels. There was room found for expansion, and expansion was needed. It was not that the New Learning greatly influenced Bridgwater ; it did not. It was working its way quietly yet surely in London and in great centres such as Oxford and Cambridge, but it was long before it greatly influenced Somerset. Here men accepted the Reformation consequences very much as a matter of course, just as they acquiesced tacitly in Abbot Whiting's murder. There is a huge force in the mere inertia of things ; in the acquiescence of men in things of which they may even strongly disapprove, but which they do not know how to prevent* Moreover there soon came to be abundance of events to claim their interest. The Spanish Armada sent a thrill through England, and it made Rome more hated than ever. Philip II of Spain declared that Pope Sixtus V had formally made England over to him, and so sent his fleet of 129 vessels, manned by 8000 sailors, carrying 19,000 soldiers, with provisions sufficient to feed 40,000 men for six months, to claim the Pope's gift. It maddened Englishmen, and it gave an immense impetus to sea-going enterprises, such as then were becoming very general.

The Armada expedition was a total failure. The triumphant motto which was inscribed upon the medal which the Queen caused to be struck greatly delighted the people: *Deus flavit, et dissipati sunt*. Every one knows of the famous Elizabethan sailors and expeditions. Bridgwater, as a port of some consequence, had her share in these voyagings. It has been stated that it was a Bridgwater man who first gave warning of the approach of the Armada, but it is difficult to discover any proof of the assertion. Yet the new outlet for men's thoughts and ambitions in this love of sea-expeditions, either for discovery or for trade, was excellent. Badly and cruelly as many of the Reformation acts were carried out, the movement led to an emancipation of thought which was entirely healthy and good.

Bridgwater was badly dealt with in the matter of education. St. John's Hospital had done a little in that direction. It was not much, but it was all there was to be had, and it was better than nothing. The inhabitants' petition to the King when the chantries were dissolved, that the people should have a grammar school given them out of the property of which the town was then mulcted, was scandalously ignored. In 1561 Queen Elizabeth (out of the great and small tithes which she granted to certain persons, and which she ought to have restored to the parish church from which they had been stolen) endowed the free grammar school at Bridgwater with an annual payment of £6. 13s. 4d. for providing education facilities for the youth of the town and of neighbouring parishes.* Richard Castleman in 1633 added to this endowment, which received a further bequest from George Crane and Mrs. Brent in 1699. The appointment of the master rested with the Bishop of Bath and Wells. Much more help should have been given to Bridgwater in the sixteenth century for educational work. The town has never entirely recovered from the penurious way in which it was treated when the dissolution was effected, and when a school was, with great humility and courtesy, asked to be granted to the people to whom, and to no other, the very property of right belonged. Richard Holworthie, a merchant and alderman of Bristol, in 1643 bequeathed *the Mayor and Commonalty of Bridgwater, where I was born,* the sum of £52, but it does not appear that the grammar school shared in the benefaction.

At the end of the sixteenth century, therefore, there was some instruction

provided for the town children. It was an important time. Bearing in mind what Bridgwater went through in 1645 and 1685, a severe trial was coming upon those who were being taught as boys early in the seventeenth century. The siege would test their mettle in 1645, and their sons' mettle, at Sedgemoor, twenty years later.

Meanwhile the Puritan tide was steadily rising. It rose in spite of Roman activities here and there, but still it rose. Sir Edward Waldegrave of Chewton was a leading Somerset Romanist. In 1562 he, his wife, and his priest, with some others, were imprisoned for having the Mass celebrated in his house. Robert Parsons, of Nether Stowey, was a vigorous seminary priest who had to flee the country in 1574, but who returned to pursue many plots, and was a tireless advocate of the Papal cause. John of Bridgwater was a canon of Wells and rector of Porlock, and he also held the rectorship of Lincoln College, Oxford. He, with some students, also became an ardent Romanist, and fled to Douay in 1577. But these men, and others who sympathized with them, suffered severely, and scant mercy was meted out to them. When James I came to the throne he wished to show some favour to the Puritans, but the Hampton Court Conference caused him to change his mind. Matters came to a sharper crisis under Archbishop Laud, who held the see of Bath and Wells for two years, without ever residing within the diocese. He succeeded to the throne of Canterbury in 1633. Laud's want of tact, his dominating nature, and his rigorous enforcement of disciplinary measures hastened the crisis. He was a man of high ideals, and he hated Puritanism. His life was truly sacrificed for the Church's sake, yet a prelate of calmer mien might have achieved his purpose where Laud failed. Bishop Piers, who held the Bath and Wells bishopric for thirty-eight years, witnessed the full force of the great storm which was coming. Laud was executed, Charles the First's unhappy policy embroiled the nation in civil war, and the Puritans, who had employed every effort and skill to gain power and influence in every part of the realm, gained an ascendancy which lasted for many years, and which brought severe persecution upon the Church of England.

Then there appeared upon the scene that vigorous and masterful man, of immense power and insight, who was destined to make and to leave his indelible mark upon English life. Oliver Cromwell rose to power,

and with him the Puritans. It is necessary to inquire how Bridgwater fared at this time.

In 1643 an assembly of divines was directed to meet at Westminster in order to advise Parliament upon matters of religion. The majority were Presbyterians, some were Independents; a few Churchmen were placed upon it, but seldom attended its meetings. At first the Presbyterians triumphed, for the Scots had bargained that they would only send an army into England against the Royalists on condition that Parliament would accept the solemn League and Covenant, which meant the Presbyterian form of religious government. But Cromwell was not a Presbyterian, he was an Independent. He was content to bide his time; at last entire power came to him. Then Independency rose to be the supreme form of religion. Presbyterianism was tolerated with other Christian bodies; it was necessary to do this. The only men who were not to be tolerated were members of the Church of England, Quakers, Roman Catholics, and Unitarians. The Prayer Book had been forbidden to be used. *The said book of Common Prayer shall not remain or be from henceforth used in any church or place of public worship in England or Wales; the Directory shall henceforth be used.* Any minister neglecting to use the Directory was for such omission to forfeit 40s. To speak or write against it involved a fine of £5. If in any public or private place, or in any family, the Prayer Book was used, each person so offending was fined; £5 for the first offence; for the second; £10; and for the third they were to suffer one whole year's imprisonment, without bail or mainprize. This law came into force on St. Bartholomew's Day, 1645.

But there was worse to come. The Long Parliament appointed a Committee of Religion, who undertook to search out and deal with scandalous ministers. *It is found, said the ordinance, "by sad experience that parishioners are not forward to complain of their ministers.* Those who were appointed to seek out such were very successful. Any clergyman who was a Royalist was guilty of *malignity*; he had to go. If he used the Church of England service, or taught its doctrines, he had to go. Orthodoxy and loyalty were thus severely dealt with. A third charge was that of immorality, but this was a blind which deceived no one. The first two offences were the vital ones; the third was thrown in as a make-weight. Any one could give evidence against a clergyman. There was no evidence

on oath, no fair trial, no attempt at justice being done. By these means some of the ablest and most learned and devout clergymen in the Church of England were expelled from their benefices under the Commonwealth. Many died in prison; some fled abroad; some eked out a precarious existence in any way they could devise. It was proposed in the House of Commons that the prisoners should be sold as slaves. There was, indeed, an ordinance that the expelled minister should have one-fifth of the value of his benefice to support himself and his family. In some cases, no doubt, this was done. But in the majority of instances it was not done, and the greatest sufferings ensued. Sad stories, very distressing to read, are the miserable conditions which at that time were forced upon the rector of Yeovilton, and the vicar of Ilminster. The President of Trinity College, Oxford, was driven out, but he managed to get the curacy of Broomfield, worth £25 or £30 a year. Some eight thousand clergymen were cast forth by this enactment. Amongst them was the vicar of Bridgwater.

Now some time before, in 1592, the aldermen of Bridgwater had very properly felt that more preaching was needed in the town. Accordingly they appointed the Rev. Cadwallader Hughes to be preacher in St. Mary's. He sought for and received confirmation of his appointment from the Bishop. In the next year he appears in the lists as vicar of the town, and he was succeeded in 1594 by the Rev. Henry Willes. After him came the famous John Devenish, in 1605. Devenish was one who strongly favoured the Puritan position, which was then very acceptable in Bridgwater. He was a man of great activity, and was an indefatigable preacher and lecturer. The Bishop of Bath and Wells of that time, William Piers, had been irritated by the lack of due conformity by some of the lecturers in the diocese, and he went on to develop a dislike to lectures and lecturers *per se*. Devenish had lectured in the church on market-days, and Humphrey Blake, his churchwarden, had been reprimanded for not presenting his vicar to the authorities for censure. In due time Mr Devenish passed away, and George Wotton was nominated by Charles I to succeed as vicar of Bridgwater. This was on January 15th, 1644. What offence Mr. Wotton committed is not known. Whether he was a Royalist, and thus hateful to the Cromwellian party, or whether he was a loyal churchman and preached and ministered according to the rules of his Church, is not told us. At any

rate he was obnoxious to those who disliked the Church of England, and in common with thousands of other clergymen he was expelled from his living. The Presbyterian Directory was ordered to be used in the churches in the year succeeding Mr. Wotton's institution to the living. If we allow a little time to elapse in order for the Commonwealth agents to see if he used the Directory, we arrive at the time of his expulsion. Probably, therefore, as with a great company of his fellow clergy, he was driven out for using the Prayer Book and for conducting the usual services of the Church. It was the year 1645, the year of Bridgwater Siege.

Wotton having been got rid of, some one had to take his place. By a deed dated January 1st, 1646, the mayor, aldermen, and burgesses appointed Mr. John Norman to be minister of Bridgwater, at a yearly salary of £110, free of rates, taxes, or assessment. Humphrey Blake was mayor. Seeing that at that time the monarchy was practically in abeyance, although the King was still at large, the Commonwealth was all-powerful, and could do pretty well as it liked. It could, and did, thrust in all sorts of people to the livings thus vacated. The Assembly of Divines had already matured plans for licensing and ordaining men who seemed to them to be fit to fill the places of the ejected clergy. That is to say, men (many of them, no doubt, excellent enough in their way, but many also who were very much the reverse) who held doctrines quite alien to Church doctrine, who accepted the Directory, who were not churchmen, but anti-churchmen, were thrust into the Church's benefices. A hundred years before Henry VIII had turned out the chantry priests; now Cromwell turned out the vicars. Mr. Norman took possession, but St. Mary's from that time until the Restoration ceased to be ministered in accordance with Church order and rule. It was a ministry; but not a Church ministry. He was minister, not vicar. He was there by the power of the sword of Cromwell's well-trained Ironsides, and the power of the Parliament, but not by the bishop's fiat, which alone holds force in the Church of England.

Mr. John Norman is reported to have been an excellent man, and to have done good work. His position must have been exceedingly painful to him; for the man whom he ousted had a wife and six children, and was in dire poverty. Moreover he had done no wrong save in obeying the recognized law of his Church. Poor George Wotton!

He obtained a wretched post as a teacher at Williton, and his wife had to spin in order to get bread for the children. Yet he fared far better than some of his fellows, for he was neither imprisoned nor killed. The Rev. Richard Powell, rector of Spaxton, when he repaired to his own house at the time the Parliamentary army possessed Taunton, had to get people to watch whether any of the soldiers were coming, seeing that they had often searched his house and thrust their swords through his beds, to find him. When Bridgwater fell, after the siege, those clergy who would not take the Covenant were driven on foot to Portsmouth, and there put on board ship to be taken to London. Mr. Powell was amongst them.

Amongst other clergy who were in the siege was the unfortunate Dr. Raleigh, Dean of Wells. He was also rector of Chedzoy, and on the breaking out of the war was very barbarously used. After the surrender of the town he was made prisoner, and taken out, contemptibly tied to a wretched horse, to Chedzoy. He was allowed to remain a captive in his own rectory, but the man who wished to have Chedzoy benefice for himself, and who afterwards got it, carried him away prisoner. His wife and children were turned out. The dean was sent, a prisoner, hither and thither, and ultimately to Wells. Being placed in the charge of one Barrett, the latter stabbed the dean to death. No punishment was inflicted; the times were too brutal and too lawless.

When Charles II became king the intruded ministers were treated (in some cases, not in many) as hardly as the clergy whom they displaced had been. Reprisals took place. It was all horrible enough, yet it was the anti-churchmen who were the first assailants. The eight thousand clergymen who were ejected by the Parliamentary edict suffered fearfully. When their day of exile and of misery was past, only eight hundred survived to come to their own again. George Wotton was one. He came back to St. Mary's a shattered man, but with strength enough left to live on for a few years. He died in peace at his vicarage in 1669.

An Act of Uniformity was passed in 1662, requiring the intruded ministers to retire from the churches in which they had ministered, unless they were willing to conform to the Church's rules. The great majority conformed and remained where they were. About eight hundred felt unable to do so, and were compelled to retire. Seeing

that they — not being churchmen — had enjoyed the Church's emoluments for sixteen years, though preaching doctrines quite foreign to Church tenets, the hardship was less severe by far than that which the clergy had endured in 1646. Eight thousand clergymen were turned out then ; happily only one-tenth of that number of ministers had to undergo ejection in 1662.*

Yet some angry feelings were left behind. The Conventicle Act and the Five-Mile Act were harsh, and most people would now think them unwise. They were on a parallel with the tyranny which enforced the use of the Directory, and which imprisoned men for using the Prayer Book even in family worship. Yet they were none the less regrettable. Among the Reformation consequences the doings of the years between 1644 and 1662 are sadly painful to remember, seeing that they deal so very largely with religious strife. The Church of England suffered by far the most severely, and suffered, in the main, in silence. But the Puritans suffered too in their turn, as seems to be the fashion in this rough world. *Hinc illæ lachrymæ*. The tears came to George Wotton and to John Norman alike.



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* Uni Pedagogo sive Ludimagistro ad Pueros et Juvenes ibidem et oppidis vicinis adjacentes et ad illam confluentes enidientium et bonis literis instruendunu"

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Calamy says that two thousand ministers were ejected, naming, however, only 523. But Curteis, who is the most careful of all the authorities, puts the number at eight hundred.