



THE MAYFLOWER: A LONDON - LEIDEN ADVENTURE GRAHAM TAYLOR

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There can be few better places for a lecture about the Mayflower than here in the Dutch Church. The Pilgrims traced the roots of their church back to the 1560s when this church was an inspiration for their cause. From 1593 their church was in Holland and in the years immediately before the voyage, according to Edward Winslow, some Pilgrims attended this church, as did Thomas Weston, the ironmonger fluent in Dutch who organised the Mayflower expedition both in London and in Leiden.

The old Dutch Church was devastated by bombing in 1940 and not rebuilt like this - so beautifully - until 1954, but traces recognisable to the Pilgrims still remain. Near the entrance is a planter that preserves a pillar from the original church; there's an original altar-stone dating back to the 13th century; and there's an original chalice which bears the date of 1613. When those Pilgrim visitors to London came to this church to take communion (or, as Winslow rather endearingly put it, to "communicate") they would have approached this ancient altar-stone and drunk the wine poured from the chalice.

The historic voyage of 1620 was organised here in the City of London. The Mayflower was a Port of London ship with a London crew which in July 1620 sailed from London to America. The majority of the passengers embarked in what is now London, either from Blackwall or Wapping. It was City of London investors who financed the voyage and chartered the ship. Even in America Plymouth Colony depended for a long time upon supplies sent by London. Without City of London merchants the Mayflower would never have sailed, and the voyage of the Mayflower is still perhaps the City's most celebrated contribution to world history.

The City investors who funded the Mayflower were known as 'adventurers' but don't be confused by the name. They weren't pirates or explorers. They were financial risk-takers, entrepreneurs, 'venturers'. Think of venture capital. Most were interested in the animal furs the Pilgrims were expected to send back. Many belonged to established City companies: the Drapers Company, the Feltmakers, the Haberdashers, the Ironmongers, the Leathersellers, the Mercers, the Merchant Taylors, the Salters, and, above all, the Skinners. All these companies had an interest in the manufacture of fur boots, fur collars or fur hats. Beaver hats were a prized luxury item in London shops, sold to well-off customers for large sums of money. The Queen sported a beaver hat and when the Indian 'princess', Pocahontas, visited London she too (as royalty) felt obliged to wear a beaver hat. Crucial in the hat chain were the Skinners who processed the beaver, and the Haberdashers who sold the end-product.

Two City of London adventurers are known to have made beaver hats: John Beauchamp and James Sherley - two friends who later fell out. Beauchamp was a Salter but presumably Sherley, a goldsmith turned financier, set up the business.

They manufactured the beaver hats outside London and even built a house out in a leafy, rural retreat known as Clapham. As well as the country house in Clapham they owned townhouses and a shop in the City, which was normal for middle-class families of the day. In a letter Sherley said he kept all his books in a house in Crooked Lane, at the northern end of London Bridge. This question of townhouses is important. Writers who want to play down the role of London believe that, if they can show a Mayflower passenger was at an address outside London, then that proves they did not live in London, but that's not the case. Sherley was no great exception in living outside London, yet having a townhouse in London and a shop on London Bridge.

Some City merchants were amongst the passengers. William Bradford, who wrote on goatskin the first history of the expedition, listed six passengers as London merchants and, as they were accompanied by 19 family members and servants, they were a large contingent. There were also passengers not in Bradford's list who had once been traders in London but had later moved to Leiden: Isaac Allerton was a London blacksmith; Degory Priest was a London hatter; and Samuel Fuller, a London serge-maker.

The City of London not only organised the Mayflower expedition but it also produced the Pilgrims' church, founded in 1592 in the borough of Southwark, at that time part of the City. This church was known to contemporaries as the 'Brownist' church, with reference to the well-known preacher, Robert Browne. Shakespeare referred to the Brownists in his play, Twelfth Night. It's because London has this double link with both merchants and the church that London has over 60 Mayflower-connected sites, more than any other place in Britain. The most famous are the wonderful halls of the livery companies; the Bevis Marks Synagogue; churches such as Southwark Cathedral, St Bride's, St Mary Rotherhithe, and of course the Dutch Church; as well as prisons such as the Clink.

It may be asked why, given the predominance of London and Leiden over the Mayflower story, the focus in Mayflower celebrations is always on Plymouth in Devon and on the East Midlands. The anomaly has often attracted attention. Jeremy Bangs, the world's greatest authority on the Mayflower, wrote that stopping in Plymouth was only "a brief, unplanned lay-over on the Pilgrims' emigration from Leiden and London to New England". The historian, Charles Banks, wrote that Bevis Marks Synagogue in London, on the site of Heneage House, where the Mayflower expedition was probably organised, is "more worthy of remembrance than the quays at Southampton and Plymouth, England, where brief stops were made..."

The usual answer to the question is that Plymouth in Massachusetts, though named 'Plymouth' many years before the Pilgrims arrived, has traditionally enjoyed strong links with Plymouth in Devon. The East Midlands contributed important names to the story of the Mayflower (Bradford, Brewster, Robinson) and has the dramatic tale of their emigration to Holland in 1608. Nonetheless, in 1620 not much happened in Plymouth, compared to London and Leiden, and in the East Midlands nothing happened at all. Plymouth contributed zero passengers to the Mayflower, and the East Midlands very few. The bulk of the 102 passengers (including the ones who embarked in Leiden) originated from London, East Anglia and Kent.

Some say Banks has missed the point. Since 1920 the purpose of the UK's Mayflower celebrations has been to cement the military alliance between the UK and the USA, and Plymouth is the largest naval base in Western Europe. Though true, this may not be the best way to build friendship between the two countries. The military alliance is historically quite recent. Older bonds are far deeper (freedom of belief, toleration and government by consent) but these would have to be celebrated in London, where political decisions were made.

There's also a geographical argument for Plymouth, that it was the last stop of the Mayflower before crossing the Atlantic - but voyages are listed by their port of origin, not their stops. The Titanic's last stop was Cork, but everyone accepts that the Titanic sailed from Southampton.

Ironically, the strongest opponents of London celebrations are to be found in London, where hostility to the Mayflower takes many different forms. Firstly, there's a somewhat snobbish reluctance to accept that London's greatness was created by risk-taking 'adventurers', dubious interlopers and problematic dissenters rather than by common-sense British chaps of sound judgement. There are plenty of other prejudices. A figure in the City, asked to support the anniversary celebrations, replied: "We do enough for the Americans already." An Anglican clergyman asked for his support, replied, "I'm a loyal member of the Church of England". A prominent member of the London Assembly said: "We shouldn't be celebrating colonialists responsible for slavery and the genocide of the Indians."

Of the three, the last objection is most easily dismissed. Whatever happened later in the colonisation of North America, the Mayflower was chosen as an icon by the anti-slavery movement, by the Chartists, and by Abraham Lincoln precisely because the Pilgrims were against slavery, against mistreatment of the Native Americans and in favour of government by consent,

The protestation of loyalty to the Anglican Church is almost as flimsy, based as it is on the strange idea that the Anglican Church in 1620 was the same as the Anglican church today. The modern Anglican Church dates from the 1688 Revolution when the existence of rival churches was accepted. In the early 17th century it was an arm of despotic state power. It imposed compulsory church attendance; it sanctioned torture and execution; it had its own courts, its own bailiffs and its own informers; it promoted from the pulpit government policies; it had absentee ministers, and others not literate enough to deliver a sermon. It's true the absentee ministers did occasionally bring some colour to the Church: one absentee vicar became a travelling minstrel, and another absentee, John Beale of Juxta Fowey, became the best wrestler in Cornwall. Nonetheless, a modern Anglican needs feel no loyalty to such a church, any more than a Catholic should feel loyalty to the Inquisition.

That leaves the third objection - that the Mayflower expedition is somehow American and therefore patriotic Brits should have nothing to do with it. In fact the contrary is the case. The Mayflower was a British ship with a British crew, financed by British investors, and transporting British passengers to a British colony. America, the country, did not exist. The settlers were fiercely patriotic Englishmen. When Bradford wrote of his pride in "our nation", the nation he was referring to was England, not America. The Pilgrims believed the English were the Chosen People, historical successors to the Jews they so admired. God had made England the first Protestant country in the world, delivered the English from Bloody Mary, and then helped them defeat the Spanish Armada and the Gunpowder Plot. The two parents of the Mayflower were Leiden and London. Neither parent was American.

Charles Banks in fact made no objection to Plymouth and the East Midlands being central to any Mayflower celebrations. They both have good stories to tell, and so too does Southampton. His point was only that London should receive recognition. Excluding London cuts out the heart of the Mayflower story. London, as the capital, was the economic and political battleground where for decades the merchants and Pilgrims fought against the state for free trade, freedom of belief, and government by consent. The Mayflower sailed from London to America. To say the Mayflower sailed from Plymouth to America, as is sometimes said, is like writing about Charles Dickens without mentioning the Marshalsea Prison, or about John Harvard without mentioning that his mother ran a pub in Borough High Street.

To understand how it happened that the Pilgrims and the London merchants came to stand for freedom, it's necessary to cast a glance back 70 years before the historic year of 1620. The background was a huge expansion in the wealth of London. Between 1500 and 1750 London's population soared from 50,000 to over 500,000, a tenfold increase in size. London boomed not only in trade but in manufacturing. By 1620 the River Thames was packed with ships bringing coals from Newcastle (it's true!) for a host of industrial processes reliant upon heat: dye-making, glass-blowing, salt-refining, soap-boiling. By 1600 there was an accumulation of capital in the hands of the London merchants enough to fund a thousand ships. The Mayflower was only the most famous.

The merchants found themselves continually bumping up against restrictions on their freedom. They wanted free trade, for individuals and for the new joint-stock companies, but the state heavily regulated business activities and also carved out big chunks of trade and sold them off as monopolies, to the great profit of the court. For example, although woollen cloth was England's chief export, the Company of Merchant Adventurers was granted monopoly control of all cloth exports to northern Europe. No competition was allowed. Anyone who tried to break the monopoly was severely punished.

A corollary of free trade was freedom of religion. To do business in Antwerp, Gdansk or Venice, the merchants needed toleration for their Protestantism but that meant London had to be tolerant in return. They needed toleration for themselves too. City merchants were highly literate and they read avidly the printed Bibles newly translated into English. In these Bibles they came across Kings who were elected, prophets who denounced rich landowners, priests who were wolves in sheep's clothing. They wanted to discuss such novelties but didn't wish to be imprisoned, or perhaps publicly whipped, for unorthodox opinions they might have imprudently imbibed from the holy texts. They also needed toleration for the Netherlands refugees whose technical skills they so valued. The City merchants were certainly averse to all persecutions. Burning heretics in the high street was bad for business.

It was a wave of Protestant refugees from the Netherlands (then still Catholic) that prompted a first small step on the road to freedom, the foundation of this Dutch Church. Archbishop Cranmer worried that among the refugees there might be communistic Anabaptists dangerous to the state, and he hoped a church in London for Dutch speakers might help identify incoming heretics, so they could be executed or at least deported. He also hoped a Dutch church would act as a model for the Protestantism he wished to establish in England.

So it was that in 1550 the Dutch Church became the first officially recognised independent church in England. It was a historic moment but, after Elizabeth came to the throne, it soon dawned upon the authorities that they might have made a big mistake. For the Dutch Church was more radical in its polity than the compromise settlement of Elizabeth allowed and it became a model not so much for the Anglican Church, as Cranmer had hoped, but for the other independent churches that now began to sprout up on all sides.

The Dutch Church was attractive to radical merchants in the City. It was a so-called 'gathered' church, not a parish church, and attendance was therefore voluntary, not compulsory. Independent of the state, the Church was also able to elect its own Pastor, Elders and Deacons. However, from all this flowed an awkward question for Queen Elizabeth: if foreigners could have a free, self-governing church in London, with elected ministers, why could Londoners not have one too? Backed by City of London merchants such as Roger Holland, who was a member of the Company of Merchant Taylors, unofficial churches began to spread across the capital. These churches met secretly in sparsely inhabited woodlands outside the City like Islington or else in the homes of the merchants, or on ships moored on the Thames that City merchants owned.

In 1567 in the Savoy area of London, just south of the Strand, 77 members of an independent church led by a Richard Fitz were arrested and imprisoned. This Fitz church was recognised years later by the Pilgrims as the ancestor of their own church in New England. It was recognised both by John Robinson and William Bradford since it had the three essential ingredients the Pilgrims looked for: it was a 'gathered' church so it was voluntary; membership was by covenant so, to join, a member had to agree with the ethos of the church; and its officers (including the Pastor and the Elders) were elected. Such churches were not democratic in a modern sense, for officers could stay in post for life, but they did embody government by consent.

The Fitz church and all other unofficial churches were soon stamped out by Elizabeth, but in the 1580s Robert Browne set up an independent church in Norwich and, when this was also suppressed, he fled the country. This was the first emigration. He was granted refuge in Middelburg by the Company of Merchant Adventurers and there was able to promote his 'Brownist' ideas.

Browne's defiance drew the attention of Richard Hakluyt, a cosmographer, whose father was a member of the Skinners Company, financially interested in the abundant furs of North America. Observing the fearlessness of Browne and his Brownists, Hakluyt had the idea that, if a colony of Brownists could be established in America, they would make perfect settlers: tough-minded and hard-working enough to build a town from scratch, yet sufficiently ethical to befriend the local Indians, win their confidence, and thus obtain the beaver furs so profitable for the Skinners Company.

Elizabeth rejected Hakluyt's proposal. The motivation of the court was quite opposite to that of companies like the Skinners. Elizabeth's court thought of America in terms of acquiring goldmines, slaves, military bases, and prime land for the second sons of aristocrats.

The big step forward for Hakluyt and the merchants was the formation of the Virginia Company in 1606. At first there were two Virginia Companies, one headed by Plymouth and the other by London but the Plymouth one failed early on. To find recruits for its settlements in America the London Company undertook what was in effect an advertising campaign, publishing an array of promotional materials. Such extravagant claims were made for life in North America (how abundant were the fish and game, how idyllic the climate was, how friendly the Indians were) that London theatres had much fun satirising the Company's over-the-top promises. Christopher Levett, after he'd visited America, was so annoyed by the hype he reported sarcastically: "I will not tell you... that corne doth grow naturally (or on trees), nor will the Deare come when they are called, or stand still and look on a man till he shoot him ... nor [will] the fish leap into a kettle...

Nonetheless, many Brownists in Holland were won over by this propaganda from London. As early as 1613 the Brownists in Amsterdam were seeking to buy a ship in London and many in Leiden were interested too. The first step Leiden took was in 1616, when Henry Jacob established in London a 'semi- separatist' Brownist church, approved by Pastor Robinson. It was called semi-separatist because it represented the Brownists in Leiden but was compliant enough to be legal, not clandestine, in London. This enabled a rich London merchant Sabine Staresmore, a Brownist, to open negotiations with King James about emigration to America. Two Leiden negotiators - Cushman and Carver - were then sent to London for the drawing up of documents.

As it happened, negotiations in 1617-20 had a bumpy ride and matters were not resolved until early in 1620 when a group of City merchants sent Thomas Weston to Leiden with a generous offer which the Leiden Pilgrims accepted enthusiastically. The merchants Weston represented were then able, after some frustrating delays, to charter the Mayflower in Rotherhithe, decide the passenger list and fix a departure date. The Mayflower sailed from London with its passengers at the end of July in 1620 and met the Leiden contingent in Southampton.

The London merchants continued to exercise control after the Pilgrims had settled in Plymouth Colony. In the 1620s the City merchant, James Sherley, was head of the Plymouth Colony joint-stock company in London. Bradford says he was “the stay, and life of the whole business”. Sherley’s goldsmith’s shop was at the sign of the Golden Horseshoe on London Bridge, and all letters about Plymouth were addressed to the Golden Horseshoe. It’s not mentioned often enough that the headquarters of Plymouth Colony in the 1620s was the shop of a City merchant on London Bridge.

Despite Sherley’s devotion to the cause, the survival of Plymouth Colony was for seven years touch and go. The colonists could not send back to London enough fish, fur or timber. The London merchants were repeatedly tempted to pull the plug by not sending any more supplies. In 1625 it looked as if that indeed might happen, and Governor Bradford was in despair, but then four of the London merchants, led by Sherley, stepped forward and, by buying out all the other investors, saved the day.

In the 1640s the City merchants had reason to be glad, for political reasons, that they had rescued New England. In the Civil War the City of London was the main supporter of Parliament against Archbishop Laud and King Charles. It was the Brownist church in London, comprising those who had decided not to emigrate, who led the campaign that brought down the Archbishop, while the Pilgrims in New England streamed back to London in their thousands and added their military muscle to Oliver Cromwell’s New Model Army. They were accustomed to carrying weapons in New England and knew how to use them.

It was not, however, until the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688, when the British Crown passed to the Dutchman, William III, and his wife, Mary II, that there was final victory for the City merchants and their twin concerns of trade and toleration. The Toleration Act of 1689 was the victory the Pilgrims had always yearned for, but most did not live to see. On free trade the victory of the City merchants over the monopolies was also emphatic. An Act of 1689 permitted anybody to export cloth anywhere. It was a victory for free trading over state control by the court. From then on more trade was conducted by joint-stock companies, and in 1694 the Bank of England was founded, the greatest joint- stock company of them all. No other country had such a powerful bank, not even wealthy Holland. Britain was now on course to become the strongest economy in Europe, and then the world.

It had been a long struggle from 1550 to the final victory in 1688. Inside this Dutch Church the history of that struggle is laid out visually. The west window shows the City of London welcoming the Dutch refugees in 1550 and it shows the coats of arms of England and the Netherlands with the motto, ‘Nos vinxit libertas’ (‘Freedom has linked us together’). In the entrance-hall is a list of pastors’ names including the name of Simon Ruytinck, the famous Christian humanist, Pastor here in 1620. The victory in 1688 is also recorded, with a stained-glass window showing William and Mary.

In 1688 the Mayflower ship was of course not mentioned. Though it was clear in the 18th century, as Hume acknowledged in his History of England, that it was the Nonconformists who had brought freedom to Britain, the turning-point for the legend of the Mayflower didn't come until the 19th century, when both the Chartists and the anti-slavery movement hailed the Pilgrims as heroes. The Pilgrims were also admired for their benign treatment of the Indians who, as Hakluyt and the Skinners Company had observed, needed to be treated well if furs were to be obtained. Liberals praised the Pilgrims for winning the principle of government by consent, which they practised themselves in New England. All this led Abraham Lincoln to praise the Mayflower as an icon of freedom, and establish Thanksgiving as a special holiday.

In the 20th century revisionists emerged who challenged the iconic status of the Mayflower. The line they took was not outright opposition (as freedom, toleration and government by consent are hard to oppose) but an allegation that the Mayflower story was largely myths and in reality the Pilgrims were a fairly undistinguished bunch of economic migrants thrown together on a fairly insignificant voyage. The revisionist tide might have swept away all faith in Mayflower values, but this has not happened. The Mayflower has not lost its hold on the popular imagination, for the debunking always sounds hollow. The critics of the Pilgrims could have been taken seriously only if they themselves had suffered imprisonment for their beliefs; or had built a town with their bare hands in the snow; or had written painstakingly on goatskin, by candlelight, a masterpiece of world literature. For that is what the undistinguished people had done, in their insignificant way.

The historian, Samuel Morison, once mocked the Pilgrims by saying that, if the Mayflower had sunk in the middle of the Atlantic, nothing in history would have changed. Another ship would have founded New England. Of course, strictly speaking, that's true, but it is to underestimate the epic voyage of the Mayflower. The Mayflower was not just a ship. It carried on board the ideas of freedom and government by consent. The Pilgrims are not remembered just for what they did, remarkable though that was, but for what they stood for...

In this year of the 400th anniversary the Mayflower still represents freedom on both sides of the Atlantic. For the City of London merchants it was the freedom to trade and invest, and for the Pilgrims they sponsored it was the freedom to speak, assemble and worship in their own way. Those freedoms were made in London, they were made in Leiden and they were made in this church. *Nos vinxit libertas*, 'Freedom has linked us together', it declares over there on the west window. The London merchants and the Leiden Pilgrims; Britain, the Netherlands, the United States: "Freedom has linked us together."

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Questions & Answers

Q: Was the original destination Virginia?

GT: The word 'Virginia' is problematic: for some it meant the whole North American coast up to 'Canada'. But it's true that originally the Mayflower was supposed to go to the Hudson River, now New York, and the destination was changed. In my book I discuss the reason for this at length and argue that probably it was not bad weather but orders from London that made the Mayflower to disembark in New Plymouth.

Q: How did they survive for food? What were their relations with the local tribes?

GT: They soon made a treaty of peace with the Wampanoag (1621) and this peace lasted for half a century. The Wampanoag taught them how to plant maize and catch eels. In return the settlers used their muskets to protect the Wampanoag crops and supplied them with knives. By allying with the Wampanoag, however, they did then have to defend the Wampanoag from their rivals.

Q: What's the evidence for the C of E being a force of violent tyranny in the 1620's. William Prynne? Didn't the Arminianism of the early 17th century lay out the blue print for the high church we saw in the the 19th century and in elements of Anglicanism today. I disagree that Anglicans should disavow the early c17th church.

GT: The word 'tyranny' wasn't used in the lecture. The church was an arm of the state but subject to the rule of law. There were different types of Arminianism: Milton's type was different from Laud's & Grotius', which depended on state power. My book praises the modern Anglican Church of 1688. If you wish to defend the early 17th C church then you must defend compulsory church attendance, the burning of heretics (1612) and execution of Catholics & Brownists (1590s). But why bother? No other church defends its bad moments.

Q: Isn't there more to be considered regarding colonisation? America was not an empty country and the eventual impact on indigenous peoples was traumatic.

GT: Robert Cushman discussed this at the time. See my book. One argument was that New England, after the 1616 epidemic, was empty. In addition, Pastor Robinson instructed them to treat the Indians well and not take anything from them without paying for it. They kept to this. Finally, it has to be remembered that the Mayflower was not a colonialist but a trading enterprise. The Pilgrims depended on co-operation with the Indians to succeed. I agree with you about colonialism in general but the Mayflower was the exception that proved the rule.

Q: Do you think that the democratic freedoms we take for granted in the UK and the US would have happened if not for the two way exchange of ideas between London and the pilgrims Plymouth community?

GT: Yes, I think the quasi-democratic freedoms would have spread anyway because Britain was a great trading nation and an exchange of ideas would have happened eventually. In addition, John Locke, the liberal philosopher of the 1688 Revolution, took his ideas from Holland, as the Pilgrims did, so there was a reinforcement loop of tolerant ideas.

Q: The 'chalice' you showed was not a chalice (church goblet) but a ewer?

GT: The so-called 'chalice' is actually a pot or flagon in Dutch rather than a ewer. The confusion is to do with the practices of the Dutch Church. Communion took place around a table. Every communicant had a cup, so the cups were not sacramental but the pot was, so the pot appears in their list of sacramental objects as their 'chalice..!'

Q: I've looked at the story of William Mullins from Dorking, a shoe maker. How would tradesmen such as he have come to know of the sailing - he went, I understand not as a saint but sailed as a tradesman

GT: As I say in the lecture, the expedition was not organised by the Pilgrims but by London merchants of whom Mullins was one. In my book I argue that Mullins probably had a shop in Southwark (the centre of the leather trade) or on London Bridge, as Dorking was on the road from Surrey which led to Borough High St and London Bridge.

Q: Graham - do you have any more information on the role of pilgrims/merchants from Danzig/Gdansk that you mentioned...

GT: A little, Roger. The first Pastor of the Dutch Church, Jan Laski, was from Gdansk. and one of the Mayflower passengers was also probably from Gdansk. See my book. Gdansk was a trading centre with many dissident Protestants and Poland was a centre of European culture.

Q: Graham, I wondered why you didn't mention the failed Newfoundland expedition of the Brownist Francis Johnson? I suppose not enough time, but it would support your general point I think.

GT: You're absolutely right. It strongly supports my thesis (that including London reveals the political, economic and religious struggles behind the Mayflower story) but there was not enough space to include all the facts that support my thesis (!).

Q: Bevis Marks was mentioned during the lecture as an important connection. Was there a degree of religious diversity amongst Mayflower pilgrims or were they all non-conformist protestants? Apologies if this was mentioned in the lecture and I missed it.

GT: I deal with this in my book and in my recent article for the Jewish Telegraph. Briefly, the Pilgrims were separatist Protestants but in Holland they made allies, including the Sephardi Jews, whom they much admired. Bevis Marks Synagogue is also on the site of Heneage House which we know the Pilgrims frequented in 1620.