

ROBERT LEIGHTON, 1611-1684  
BISHOP OF DUNBLANE 1661-1671 <sup>1</sup>

*Britain in the time of Robert Leighton*

A brief description of the religious and political conflicts of the 17th century is essential if we are to understand the life of Robert Leighton.

In the aftermath of the 16th century Reformation wide religious divisions emerged ranging from Roman Catholics to Episcopalians (e.g. the Church of England) to Presbyterians and Independents (e.g. Baptists and Congregationalists). Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Britain, and especially in Scotland, the main conflict was between the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians.

The Episcopalians believed that the King, not the Pope, should exercise control over the church with the episcopacy, Archbishops and Bishops, as his agents. They also held that church traditions, especially the order of service, which had grown up since the early days of the church, should largely be maintained even though there was no specific reference to them in the New Testament.

In contrast the Presbyterians based their beliefs on a literal interpretation of the Bible and considered that any innovations since the New Testament, which were not supported by the original text, were corruptions and should be removed. They placed the Episcopacy in this category and the liturgy of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. The Presbyterians were prepared to accept the King as protector of the church but considered that all its other affairs should be managed by ministers and elders meeting in Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods and General Assemblies.

These religious conflicts were overlaid by political and social tensions. Since 1300 in England there had been a continual struggle between the Kings and their Parliaments over taxation and how the government of the country should be managed. By the 17th century Kings stood for autocratic control as expressed in the Divine Right of Kings. Parliaments, on the other hand, wanted some form of partnership between the monarch and themselves to avoid arbitrary taxation and the infringement of the individual rights of the wealthier members of the community. On the outbreak of Civil War in 1642 these tensions increased, and social divisions hardened with the majority of the landed class supporting the king, if reluctantly, and the merchant classes, especially in towns like London, backing Parliament.

In Scotland Charles 1st had tried in the 1630s to introduce religious changes that would have made the Scottish Church, which was largely Presbyterian, more like the Church of England. This provoked a massive reaction and the signing of the

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript of chapter from "Four Great Churchmen of Dunblane" by Bill Inglis (Publ. Dunblane Council of Churches, 2000). The study was prepared as part of the Dunblane churches' celebration of the millennium. Some pictures from the original have been substituted by others. Thanks to the author for permission to produce this transcript.

National Covenant. Subsequently the Church in Scotland and much of the Lowlands supported Parliament while the Highlands rallied to the King.

### *Robert Leighton's family and especially his father*

It was into this cauldron of conflict that Robert Leighton was born in 1611. He came from an old landed family who lived at Usan near Forfar. Some of his ancestors had already been distinguished in the church. Henry de Lichton in the early 15th century was Bishop of Aberdeen and was largely responsible for the building of St. Machars Cathedral. But by the late 16th century it appears that the family had fallen on hard times with at least two of Robert Leighton's ancestors being accused of murder and it is clear that about this time they lost their land.

It is necessary to give some attention to Alexander Leighton, Robert's father, because his life illustrates the brutality of the religious and political conflicts of the time and because what happened to his father may have influenced Robert's life.

Alexander Leighton was a man of some distinction. He was a graduate of St. Andrews University, possibly Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University (c. 1610), certainly a Doctor of Medicine from Leyden University in Holland graduating in 1618. He settled in England where, to his great cost, he became a political and religious pamphleteer of some note. He is credited with a number of inflammatory pamphlets in the 1620s which culminated in "An Appeal to Parliament, or Zion's Plea against Prelacy".

This effusion was an extreme attack on the bishops which illustrates the intensity of the Presbyterian hatred of episcopacy. Alexander Leighton argued that there was no biblical authority for the creation of bishops, that all the evils that had affected Britain since 600AD (presumably the arrival of St. Augustine) had been because the country had bishops. He stopped short of attacking the King whom he argued had been deceived by the bishops, but he did refer to his Catholic Queen, Henrietta Maria, as the "daughter of Heth". Looking at this pamphlet with 21st century eyes it seems as if Alexander Leighton was unbalanced. But this was not the case. His contemporaries saw little wrong with what he had written, five hundred of them signing his petition including some Members of Parliament. Their response illustrates the extreme nature of religious conflict in the 17th century.

The government, especially the church, which was headed by Archbishop Laud could not tolerate such an open attack on its authority. Laud was determined to drive the Presbyterians out of the Church of England, to strengthen the power of the bishops and to revive many of the liturgical practices abandoned at the Reformation. He saw Leighton as the epitome of the Presbyterian opposition faced by the Church of England.

Leighton was brought before the High Commission of the Church, fined £10,000 and imprisoned in the Fleet for life. He was also to be degraded. He was to be publicly whipped, have his ears cut off, have his nose split on both sides and be branded on

both cheeks with the initial's "SS", standing for "Sower of Sedition". This barbarous sentence was to be carried out on two separate occasions a month apart with one half of his face being disfigured on each occasion. After the first half of his face had been disfigured it is likely that the second half of the sentence was not carried out because the wounds from the first had still not healed.

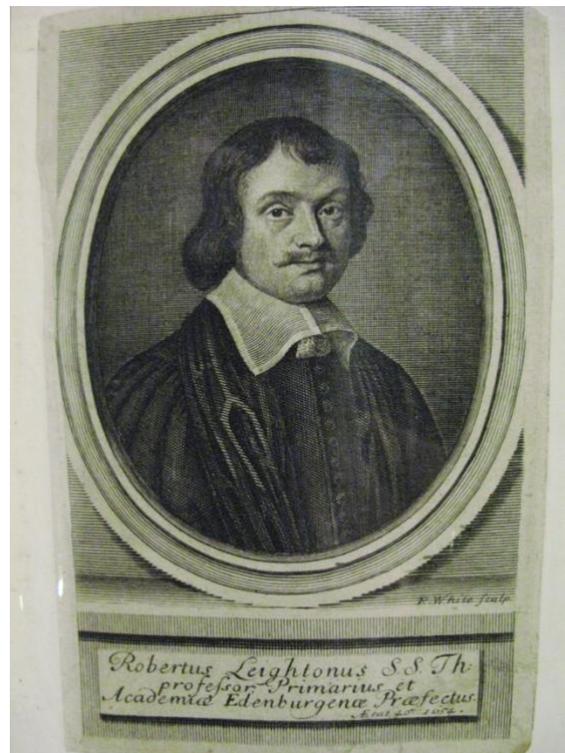
Alexander Leighton then served 10 years in prison before being released by Parliament. They made him the Keeper of Lambeth House, a state prison until he died in 1649 aged 70. It is one of the ironies of history that one of Leighton's first prisoners was Archbishop Laud imprisoned on Parliament's instructions.

There is no doubt that his father's example will have made Robert Leighton aware of the vicious and damaging nature of religious divisions at that time.

### ***Robert Leighton's Early Life 1611-1641***

Very little is known about Robert Leighton's early life. His father certainly sent him to Scotland for his education where he attended Edinburgh University from 1627 to 1631. At university Leighton developed according to his friend Burnet "*the greatest command of the purest Latin that I ever knew in any man*". Latin was of course important as the lingua franca of the academic and intellectual world of the time. He also appears to have had some sense of fun being rusticated from University for writing an offensive poem about the Lord Provost of Edinburgh's nose.

After graduating from Edinburgh Leighton went to France apparently on his father's instructions. If his father was responsible for this decision it was odd given that France was predominately a catholic country. It is possible that his father wanted him to join a community of Huguenots in the south of France. Whatever the plan Robert acquired an excellent knowledge of French "*speaking it like one born there*" and a tolerance of, if not a liking for Catholicism. In later life he expressed regret that Protestant Europe had no form of monasticism and acknowledged that he was very much attracted by some of the devotional literature of mediaeval Europe, especially Thomas a Kempis who was his favourite amongst all Christian authors. It was almost certainly at this time that he began to doubt if any one of the Christian churches of the time had a monopoly of the truth.



1. Leighton as Principal of Edinburgh University 2

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<sup>2</sup> Copy of engraving in the papers of Rev James Hutchison Cockburn, with thanks to Dunblane Museum.

### *The Years at Newbattle (1641-53)*

Shortly after his return from France Leighton was presented by the Earl of Lothian to the parish of Newbattle near Edinburgh where he served for twelve years until 1653. During this period he appears to have been a fairly conventional Presbyterian minister though he began to acquire a reputation for preaching.

At this time ministers gave very long sermons, upwards of an hour, which they generally read. They tended to analyse a short sentence from the Bible from many angles slowly building up an argument, very like a university lecture. Leighton considered that this approach was unsuited to the typical 17th century Scottish congregation who were for the most part poorly educated. He thought that sermons should be short, should not be read, should explain a substantial portion of the Bible, for example a story, and should flow continuously without being divided into sections.

After twelve years at Newbattle Leighton was offered and accepted the Principalship of Edinburgh University. It is difficult to understand how he was given this significant position from the relative obscurity of being a parish minister, even though he was close to Edinburgh. The likely explanation is that Cromwell who was the effective ruler of Scotland made the decision. Leighton was in London in the summer of 1651 to plead the cases of a number of Presbyterians who were imprisoned in London and this is the time when he had dealings with Cromwell who must have been impressed by him. The Protector probably gave instructions to the Town Council of Edinburgh to appoint Leighton and they obeyed.

### *Leighton as Principal of Edinburgh University*

Though the University was small, with only a few hundred students, and a handful of staff, the Principalship was still an important position. Along with the other Scottish Universities Edinburgh provided an education for the social elite of Scotland and prepared young men for the ministry.

Leighton's period as Principal appears to have been one of quiet consolidation. His main achievement was that he was the only Scottish Principal to prevent religious conflict affecting the students though on at least one occasion it was a close call. According to one contemporary source Leighton let his affection for Thomas a Kempis cloud his judgement when he recommended his work to the professor of Theology for use with the students. Luckily for Leighton the suggestion went no further.

His other actions as Principal were aimed at improving the education of the students at Edinburgh. He revived the Wednesday lectures and established a series of lectures to be delivered in the College Hall which impressed a student like Robert Sibbald. Also, like many academics since his day, he became concerned at the standard of the students enrolling for the University, especially their Latin. To remedy this he proposed that each Presbytery should establish a grammar school with the explicit purpose of preparing boys for University. The suggestion was not

implemented, but, if it had been, it would have streamlined university courses in Scotland, though at the cost of taking the best pupils away from the burgh and parish schools.

### *Leighton becomes a Bishop*

In 1658 Cromwell died and over the next two years the country moved slowly towards the Restoration of the monarchy with Charles II becoming King in 1660.

For the Scottish church the return of the Stuarts was a worrying period. The church was divided into two parties, the moderates, or Resolutioners, who had supported Charles when he had attempted to restore the monarchy between 1649 and 1651 and the radicals, or Protesters, who had opposed him. The Resolutioners hoped that the King would be content with moderate Presbyterianism north of the border, especially that he would not restore the Bishops, and they thought that they had an ally at court in the new Secretary of State for Scotland, the Earl of Lauderdale.

But they were to be disappointed. Charles, a secret catholic, did not like Presbyterianism, describing it as "*not a religion for a gentleman.*" The main English counsellors at the court, led by Clarendon, were determined to restore Anglicanism in England and wished to see a similar settlement north of the border. The Scottish Parliament, with Middleton at its head, was strongly in favour of Episcopacy and Lauderdale seeing the way things were going was not prepared to sacrifice his career for Presbyterianism in Scotland.

As a result, in the first six months of 1661 the Presbyterian system, which had been established since 1638, was swept away and Episcopalianism was re-established.

It is difficult to see how Leighton was persuaded to accept a bishopric. He had served as a Presbyterian minister for ten years and as Principal of Edinburgh University under Cromwell. It is true that he had never taken the lead in religious disputes but he had been a serving Presbyterian for twenty years. It is not surprising that in some quarters he was accused of blatant careerism and treachery for accepting a bishopric.

It seems that Leighton was determined from the first to use his new office to attempt to lessen religious divisions. The overall tenor of his comments at this time to concerned friends in London was that the divisions between the churches were much exaggerated. For example his friend Brodie, who met Leighton frequently in London, records him on one occasion as follows:

*He said there was not that difference between the Psis (papists) and us to put us to excommunicate and condemn judge and persecute one another.*

This is a very bold statement given the fear of Catholics at the time. Leighton also considered that the vital core of religion was not concerned with external features.

Again Brodie reports him as saying:

*Religion did not consist in these external things whether of government or ceremonies but in righteousness, peace and joy.*

Eventually he goes beyond these statements to suggest that the truly religious on all sides might be reconciled as follows - again to Brodie:

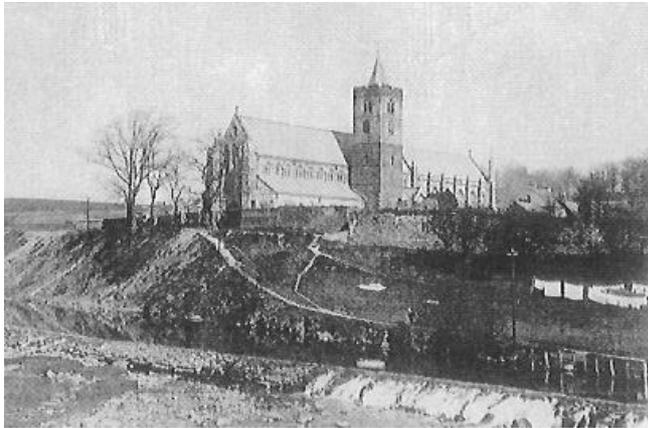
*And what will you say if there be in this then something - that would allow of reconciling the devout on different sides.*

Certainly if these were Leighton's aims, and all the subsequent evidence supports that view, he was adopting a very courageous stand. None of his fellow bishops shared his views, many of them having fled to England during the years following the Civil War, and he was therefore isolated amongst his new colleagues. Also given the strong beliefs of many Scots who, like his father, had a violent hatred of episcopacy he can have had few illusions about his reception by even the moderate Presbyterians.

### ***Leighton as Bishop of Dunblane 1661-1671***

From the start Leighton did his best not to inflame Presbyterian feelings. Apparently he chose Dunblane as his bishopric because the stipend was the lowest in Scotland.

He alone of the bishops absented himself from the elaborate ceremonies in Edinburgh which were devised to celebrate the new episcopacy and his appearances in the Scottish Parliament were rare and designed to reconcile the different religious factions.



This policy of moderation was continued in his administration of the diocese. We are fortunate to have a full record of Leighton's recommendations to Synod, so we know what he wanted to achieve as a bishop and his policy was essentially Presbyterian with few traces of Episcopalianism, despite being a bishop.

### ***2. The Cathedral from the old road along the river <sup>3</sup>***

**First** he recommended a very simple form of service. He made no attempt to impose the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. Instead he insisted on very modest changes to which few could have had objections. His principal concern was that the existing services lacked reverence with nobody taking any serious notice of the service until the sermon began. It appears that even the bible readings were not listened to by the congregation who were too busy catching up on gossip or conducting business deals.

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<sup>3</sup> Scan of picture from the original article, with thanks to Dunblane Museum.

Leighton wanted to persuade the congregation to behave in a more appropriate manner. He suggested that the service should open with a confession of sin, followed by two readings from the testament, a psalm, said not sung, the Creed and the Ten Commandments before the sermon. He also insisted repeatedly that the congregation should either stand, or kneel, during prayers, but not sit.

**Second**, Leighton tried to enforce a moral code which was identical to the one imposed after 1690 when the national church became Presbyterian. Like them he wanted the Kirk Sessions and Presbyteries to prosecute those guilty of fornication, of drunkenness, of swearing and of mocking religion. Similarly he identified the circumstances in which these offences were likely to be committed so that those in charge could be watchful. For example Leighton was concerned about the swearing which took place at harvest time. This was probably because itinerant labour was taken on to gather the harvest. So he instructs ministers to prevent cursing as follows:

*And that it be by all ministers recommended to the owners of the crops and overseers of the reapers to range them so to their work and in such division as may give least occasion to anything of that kynd.*

He also was keen that every effort should be made in private to ensure that an individual had really repented before they appeared in public before the congregation.

**Thirdly** Leighton wanted a strict routine to be observed throughout the year. Like the Presbyterians he recommended that there should be at least one Holy Communion per year. But he did not suggest monthly communions as was the case in the Anglican Church. Also he was keen that the ministers should be conscientious in catechising the younger members of the congregation and that everybody should be examined as to their behaviour before a Communion, very much a Presbyterian custom. He recommended family prayers, though to judge by his continual reiteration of this requirement very few families must have held prayers. Ministers did not escape, having to be soberly dressed, to spend time in prayer and meditation and to promote peace rather than pointing out each other's weaknesses.

**Finally** Leighton went as far as he could to make the bishop just one other minister when it came to making decisions. At the start of his period of office he made the following declaration:

*It was declared by the Bishop that the Synod and each member of it have now as full and free liberty of voting and declaring their assent and dissent in all matters as in former times.*

In other words he did not want to dictate what should be done. He wanted members to have the same powers as previously, i.e. as under the Presbyterian system which preceded the Restoration.

It is difficult to see any difference in the management of the church between Leighton's time and the Presbyterians who were to follow, except that he was a bishop and there were no bishops after 1690.

As Barty has observed there is little that we can record about Leighton's personal life in Dunblane. There is no definite evidence of where he lived, but it was not in the Bishop's Palace which had for some time been a ruin. Even the Bishop's Walk is unlikely to refer to Leighton. However he clearly liked Dunblane. He gave a substantial sum to be invested for the poor of the parish and he gave his most precious possession, his library, to the town.

There is only one story that has come down to us from his period living in the town which is worth recounting because there is a familiar sting in the tail which seems to have been a characteristic of Leighton's humour. He is quoted in Butler's Leighton from a book edited by Alexander Allardyce as follows:

*A young woman, the widow of a minister in his diocese, to whom he had been exceedingly kind, took it into her head that the Bishop was in love with her. Thinking he was long in breaking his mind, she went to him in the Haining, a lonely walk by the waterside, where he used to meditate.*

*"Oh my Lord" she said "I had a revelation last night."*

*"Indeed" answered he "I hardly imagined you would ever have been so highly honoured. What is it?"*

*"That your lordship and I were to be married together."*

*"Have a little patience" replied the Bishop much abashed "till I have a revelation too."*

### ***Leighton and his attempts to reconcile the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians***

During his time as Bishop of Dunblane Leighton was perfecting his plan to attempt to bring about agreement between the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians which was his original motivation for joining the episcopacy. As early as 1665 he was circulating two papers arguing that reconciliation was possible. These papers were not supported by the other Bishops, so Leighton was on his own.

But not for long. Lauderdale, the Secretary of State for Scotland, was seeking a satisfactory religious policy in Scotland. He was considering his policy in the aftermath of the rebellion of 1666 which had been largely caused by religious grievances. Reluctantly in 1660 he had accepted that episcopacy should be restored but, as he had anticipated, it encountered widespread opposition. This took the form of illegal conventicles (or services) being held in many parishes in Lowland Scotland. These conventicles were taken mainly by ministers who had refused to accept the new religious settlement. They were combined, especially in the west, with outright hostility to the new ministers imposed after 1661.

Lauderdale had a number of alternative policies. He could suppress the opposition, he could ignore it or he could try and reconcile at least the moderate Presbyterians to the new settlement.

Suppressing the opposition was likely to be difficult given the geography of Scotland, many of the conventicles taking place in the hills. The local sheriffs and gentry were very reluctant to act. Some of them sympathised with the Presbyterians and others did not want to be unpopular with their tenants. A standing army could be raised, but it would have to be very large to cover the area where there was opposition. Also such a force was expensive and the King was short of money - he did not even have a standing army in England.

Tolerating the opposition was difficult since their activities continued in defiance of the government and they appeared to be growing in influence. They were even able to hold alternative presbyteries in many areas and on at least one occasion an alternative General Assembly. No government could turn a blind eye to such continual disobedience.

So the third policy of trying to win over the moderate Presbyterians was an attractive alternative. It also appealed to the King. Being a very liberal man he did not want to see people persecuted for their beliefs.

This is where Leighton appears in a new light. There has been a tendency to see him as a saintly figure who tried a win but wholly unrealistic policy of reconciliation between Presbyterians and Episcopalians. This is not correct. Saintly he may have been, but his policy was mainstream, appealing to realists like Lauderdale and the King who were prepared to back him in an attempt to get it to succeed. There was a great deal more of the politician, albeit cased in principle, in Leighton than historians have been prepared to admit. After all there were very few men at that time who so impressed both Oliver Cromwell and his arch enemy Charles II that he was given significant appointments by both of them.

So in the late 1660s a new policy of reconciliation was hatched by Lauderdale, Leighton and the King. Leighton's papers on reconciliation were widely read in government circles. A Declaration of Indulgence was issued in 1669 to allow moderate ministers to join the church (41 were eventually admitted) and to set up negotiations between the church and the Presbyterians. To ensure that negotiations were as fruitful as possible Leighton was to be appointed to the Archbishopric of Glasgow, the toughest post in the church because he had to attempt to control the unruly south west of Scotland. There he was to conduct negotiations with the Presbyterians and so run the diocese that opposition was reduced and as many people as possible reconciled. He was to take on the opposition in their heartland.

### *Leighton as Archbishop of Glasgow*

All was not plain sailing. Initially Leighton refused the appointment as Archbishop. Perhaps he had only seen himself as the negotiator. Intense pressure was placed on him. The arguments of Lauderdale and the Earl of Lothian "*well nigh made him cry*" but he still refused. The logjam was broken by the King ordering Leighton to London and after a month there he eventually capitulated to the King. Typically, however, he only agreed on two conditions: that he should only receive one fifth of

the income of the see and that he should not have the title of Archbishop though he was doing the job.



3. *Glasgow and its Cathedral by Slezer 1692* <sup>4</sup>

On arrival in Glasgow Leighton adopted a three pronged policy.

**First** he set up a committee to remove scandalous ministers (i.e. individuals whose conduct was not morally acceptable for a minister) who had simply been given parishes in the diocese of Glasgow because of their Episcopalian sympathies. This initiative had only limited success. The worst ministers simply fled, but there were a considerable number who were not bad enough for a case to be brought against them and not of a good enough quality to be regarded as satisfactory by their parishes.

**Second** Leighton organised a morale boosting tour throughout the diocese led by himself and six well known ministers to preach in parishes where there was no minister at all. This scheme was successful enough for the Presbyterians to follow it up by sending in their own leading preachers to try to negate the impact of Leighton and what became known as his "*six evangelists*". Leighton himself drew large audiences when he preached.

**Thirdly** Leighton set up talks with some moderate Presbyterians in August 1670. In due course the Presbyterians met members of the Privy Council including Lauderdale.

Leighton adopted a very moderate argument in the negotiations. His case was that a mild form of episcopacy was not contrary to scripture, that it had been accepted up to 1638 in Scotland and that Presbyterians in other countries had permitted moderate episcopacy. He made the vital point that bishops in his view were simply

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<sup>4</sup> Picture as in the original article, re-sourced from Wikimedia Commons.

moderators of the essentially Presbyterian system of Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries and Synods. He rejected what he called prelacy which was a system in which the bishops and their appointees, for example deans and archdeacons, controlled all decisions in the church without reference to ordinary ministers and lay elders.

Nothing resulted immediately, but the Presbyterians agreed to go and discuss the issues raised at the meeting with their brethren. Negotiations dragged on through the autumn with the negotiators repeatedly asking for more time to discuss matters with their colleagues. Members of the government were becoming impatient and they insisted on a final meeting in Paisley in January 1671 at which negotiations finally broke down.

While the policy clearly failed it was quite close to success. The delays requested by the Presbyterians showed that they were serious about the negotiations which reveals that Leighton's approach was skilful. It was reported after their failure that many Presbyterian ministers were disappointed and certainly in the year which followed their collapse the number of conventicles markedly reduced. We have a very complete record of the arguments put forward by Leighton and there is no doubt that it was persuasive. It is likely that at least some of the Presbyterians would have accepted Leighton's version of episcopacy, but they would only do so if it had been passed into law. But the government would only have done this, if they had initially submitted. A close call.

After the failure of the talks Leighton had no stomach for staying in Glasgow. By 1672 he asked the King for permission to resign. The King greatly valued Leighton and initially refused. In the end a compromise was reached and Leighton agreed to serve one more year from August 1672.

### *Retirement*

Leighton eventually resigned his see in December 1673 retiring to Sussex to live with his sister and her family. The final ten years were spent quietly in the Sussex countryside with occasional visits to London. There was one significant interruption which reinforces the picture of Leighton as an effective statesman. After the revolt of 1678 which culminated in the defeat of the Presbyterians of the south west of Scotland at the battle of Bothwell Brig the King once more considered implementing a policy of moderation in Scotland and invited Leighton to head the initiative. Leighton refused and the moment passed, but it is a clear indication of the Kings' opinion of Leighton that he should want to bring him out of retirement at the age of 69 for such a difficult assignment.

Eventually Leighton died in December 1684 on a visit to London at the Bell Inn close to St. Pauls of a sudden chill which developed into pneumonia. It is characteristic of his rather quirky originality that he was happy to die in an inn rather than with relatives. He describes the advantages of dying with strangers as follows:

*that the officious tenderness and care of friends was an entanglement to a dying man and that the unconcerned attendance of such as could be pressurised in such a place would give less disturbance.*



4. *The house where Leighton spent his retirement in Sussex*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Scan of picture in the original article, with thanks to Dunblane Museum.