

Unveiling of the blue plaque for John Allen Giles, 11 July 2026

We are here to honour John Allen Giles, who as a young man showed extraordinary intellectual brilliance, and seemed destined for the highest academic success. But he didn't end up as a bishop or regius professor, but simply as perpetual curate of Bampton from 1846 to 1855, and even that ended in disaster. Somehow, nothing in his life ever worked out as planned: his judgement was poor, he failed to think through the consequences of his actions, and he was amazingly accident-prone

So why is he getting a blue plaque? Partly because of his local significance, partly because his wider significance does deserve to be better known. For all his weaknesses, he was a man of great talent and notable achievements, as well as a creative figure in the history of Oxfordshire. He was also a very nice man, warm-hearted and highly sociable, who won affection for himself here in Bampton.

As an editor and translator of medieval texts, Giles ranks high among the heroic Victorians. Best-known for his editions of the Thomas Becket material, he also edited works of Aldhelm, Bede, Alfred, Lanfranc, Geoffrey of Monmouth, Peter of Blois, minor Greek poets, and many others. He worked in an age that increasingly saw the need for modern editions of important medieval authors. But he worked too fast and under too much pressure, so that his editions left much to be desired.

Still, there is another way of looking at this. He was the greatest of all the Victorian interpreters of the English medieval past, and its narrative sources, for a mass audience, at a time when the potential readership among the middle classes and aspirant upper working classes was expanding hugely. He translated many works into English, making them available for the first time to those without university training or Latin, especially in the cheap cloth-backed versions issued in the Bohn's Library series. With two other series of elementary books, 'Dr Giles's Juvenile Library' and 'Dr Giles's Keys to the Classics', he broadened the horizons of generations of young readers. This was one thoroughly positive outlet for the spontaneous and philanthropic sociability that could too often get him into trouble. At least Giles can be considered outstanding for his phenomenal output: across his career he wrote he wrote more than 180 books!

Giles's publications include the *History of Bampton* (1848) and *History of Witney* (1852). These relatively slight works illustrate a different – and in some ways more innovative – side to him. As a local historian, he was writing in the fallow period between the era of grand county histories up to about 1820, and the era of county societies and journals from about 1850 onwards. The two books do contain signs of Giles's habitual disorganization, but there is significantly more to them than that. They convey a strong and sympathetic sense of place, and observation by a keen and curious eye. There is also a lively interest in local life and customs, of the kind that would usually have to wait another two generations, until the age of Cecil Sharp and the late Victorian folklorists. At Bampton, for instance, he describes beliefs, ghost-stories, the Christmas mummers, the St Stephen's day breakfasts, and the morris-dancing, for most of which he is the first witness by several decades. In a national context, this style of single-place local history was innovatory; in a local context,

Giles was crucial for the preservation and interpretation of Bampton's distinctive traditions.

Indeed, one gets a strong sense that he felt more at home among the working-class people of Bampton than among his social peers. One memory of that endures still. As many Bampton people know, the Christmas mummers' play includes two sword-combats followed by death and resuscitation. Why two? Because Giles imported a text from Somerset and asked for it to be used in Bampton. Since the Bampton mummers already had their own version, it's unclear how delighted they were with that, but they didn't want to hurt Giles's feelings. So they simply ran the two plays together, producing the duplicated version that we know today.

Another of his Bampton initiatives was to establish a private printing-press here in his vicarage in 1846. (Characteristically, he operated it illegally for several months because he didn't realize that it had to be licensed!) A notable aspect was the training of cohorts of working-class girls as printers: Giles's 'press gang' became celebrated. And here I want to tell one story that illustrates what a nice person he was. His *History of Bampton* normally has the expected imprint for the author's press, but a few rare copies bear the imprint 'Printed by S. Tanner, Bampton'. Who was that? Giles's diary explains how he trained a local girl called Sophia Tanner, 'of elegant appearance and good manners, sufficient to have adorned a superior station'. In fact, the 1841 census records Sophia Tanner, the child of an unmarried mother, as an inmate of the Bampton and Weald workhouse. Giles must have allowed her to run off some copies in her own name so that she could present herself as an established printer. One wonders how many Victorian clergymen would have done that for a workhouse girl.

Giles's theological views were broad, and he was no believer in the divine infallibility of scripture. He apparently didn't read German, and it is unclear how far his ideas developed independently of German scholarship, but in 1852 he embarked on what was soon nicknamed 'the Bampton Bible': a Bible translation accompanied by a critical and unorthodox commentary, which among other things questioned the received authorship of the Gospels. Unfortunately for Giles, his diocesan bishop was none other than Samuel Wilberforce, who was having none of it. In a way, his clash with Giles was a rehearsal for his far more famous clash with Thomas Huxley in 1860. Wilberforce couldn't silence Huxley, but he could silence Giles, who was a curate operating under his licence. So he just told Giles to withdraw the book or resign. Giles withdrew, but in very ill grace indeed, and his annoyance with the established church may have contributed to his final catastrophic lapse of judgement.

That happened on 4 October 1854, when he performed the marriage of Jane Green, one of his printing girls, to a local shoemaker. If you look at the parish register it looks like a perfectly ordinary entry, but in fact it is a very strange one. One of the witnesses was not present, and Giles forged her mark. The entry states that the marriage was by licence, but there was no licence. And the marriage took place at 7 am, outside the legal hours. Knowing Giles as we do, we can perhaps be less surprised than some contemporaries at this extraordinary behaviour. He was

distracted at the time, he was contemptuous of formalities, and he had absolutely no idea that he had committed a serious felony.

It all came out, and Giles was tried for forgery at Oxford assizes by a mystified but sympathetic judge and jury. He was given the lightest possible sentence, and spent three months as a guest of the governor of Oxford prison, with a nice room where he could get on with his writing without distractions. After that he moved to Somerset, and spent many more happy years as a rector there. That had its Gilesian moments too, but is another story.

Giles is most celebrated for his crime, which probably inspired the plot of Wilkie Collins's novel *The Woman in White*. But we haven't put 'forger' among his attributes on the blue plaque (in any case he wasn't a very good one), and that really isn't what we should be remembering. Instead, let us celebrate his energy, his intellectual curiosity, his role as a public interpreter of history, his contributions to the community of Bampton, and his generous-mindedness.

John Blair

Further reading

John Blair, 'Giles, John Allen', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 22 (2004), pp. 229-30.

D. Bromwich (ed.), *The Diary and Memoirs of John Allen Giles* (Somerset Record Society 86, 2000).

Nicholas Vincent, 'John Allen Giles and Herbert of Bosham: the Criminous Clerk as Editor', in M. Staunton (ed.), *Herbert of Bosham: a Medieval Polymath* (York, 2019).