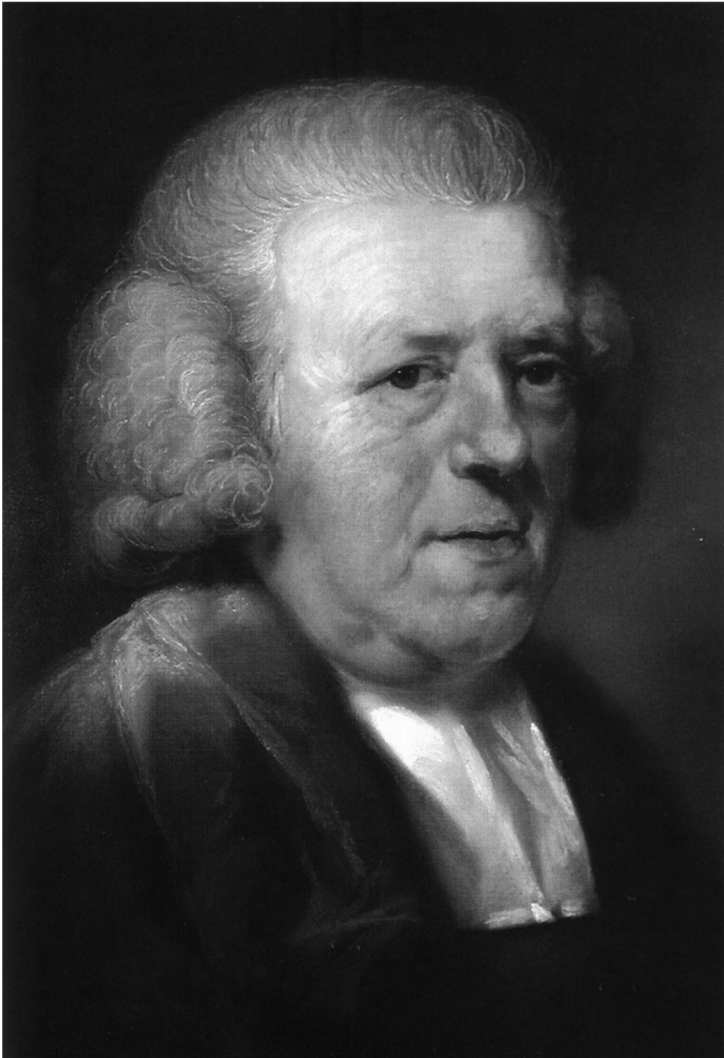


Olney

The Home of Amazing Grace



John Newton in later life

Olney

The Home of Amazing Grace

John Newton: his Hymn and his Friends



Graham Chewter

Gospel Standard Trust Publications

2023

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Cover Illustrations: View of Olney Church from Emberton by James Andrews (Courtesy of The Cowper & Newton Museum, Olney).

Foreground: John Newton (inset).

Publisher's Note: The Gospel Standard Trust issues this book with the hope that it might be spiritually profitable. Although we only issue books we feel set forth a Scriptural standard, there will be differences in opinion and interpretation, and the most gracious of men still have to say, 'Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect.' We trust our readers will prayerfully 'prove all things' and 'hold fast that which is good,' whilst bearing in meekness with any imperfections.

Dedication

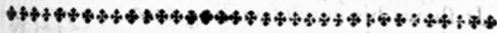
This is book dedicated to my four sons,
their wives, and each of the grandchildren.

'Children are an heritage of the LORD' (Psalm 127.3)

H Y M N XL.

More with us than with them. Chap. vi. 16.

- 1 **A** L A S ! Elifha's fervant cry'd;
When he the Syrian army spy'd ;
But he was soon releas'd from care,
In answer to the prophet's pray'r.
- 2 Straitway he saw, with other eyes,
A greater army from the skies ;
A fiery guard around the hill,
Thus are the saints preserved still.
- 3 When Satan and his host appear,
Like him of old, I faint and fear ;
Like him, by faith, with joy I see,
A greater host engag'd for me.
- 4 The saints espouse my cause by pray'r,
The angels make my soul their care ;
Mine is the promise seal'd with blood,
And JESUS lives to make it good.



I. CHRONICLES.

H Y M N XLI.

Faith's review and expectation.
Chap. xvii. 16, 17.

- 1 **A** Mazing grace ! (how sweet the sound)
That sav'd a wretch like me !
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

M. M. Y. H.

D 3

2 'Twas

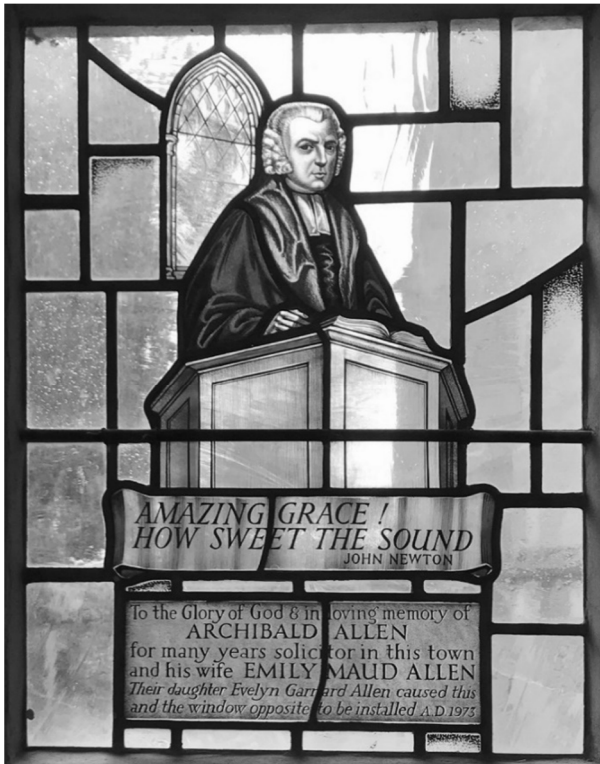
'Amazing Grace' as it appeared in the first printing of the Olney Hymns (1779)

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Old view of Olney Church



The Newton Memorial Window, in Olney Parish Church,
showing Newton in the pulpit at Olney

(Courtesy of Olney Church)

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How this Book Came To Be Written

Early in 2020, my wife and I welcomed two friends to our home. As they had never been to the Cowper and Newton museum in Olney before, my wife took them over. There she purchased a new publication - *John Newton's Diary: 1764*. The year 1764 was marked by Newton's earnest seeking for God's guidance in respect to a settled ministry coming to fruition in his appointment as the Olney curate. Supplied with numerous footnotes and photos, this diary is an attractive publication and a mine of fascinating information.

A few weeks later, in visiting the town, I was pleasantly surprised to see on the southern approach road a large tourist-style sign which read: 'Olney - Home of Amazing Grace.' These two things combined led me to a new interest in Olney and its significance. So, a number of old books, read long ago, were consulted along with many others, leading me to realise that an important anniversary was approaching in respect to Newton's most famous hymn. A variety of books, as well as online resources increasingly revealed additional aspects of Olney's important testimony for the gospel in times past. The best way to describe my research experience is to say, in the words of Bedford's most famous son, John Bunyan: 'The more I pulled, the more it came!'

This book is intended for the layman and is therefore written in popular style with footnotes kept to a minimum. If any reader should wish to delve deeper the Bibliography at the end will assist.

Acknowledgements

I am very much indebted to the Trustees of The John Newton Project who have produced an excellent website full of fascinating details regarding Newton, his friends, his ministry and hymns.

One of the greatest authorities on John Newton is Marylynn Rouse, Honorary Visiting Fellow of Leicester University and founder of the John Newton Project. She has willingly given up her time to discuss many aspects of this book, which has enabled me to obtain a clearer picture of Newton and his acquaintances at Olney and elsewhere. This has been important, as there are a number of common misconceptions surrounding Newton and Olney, which Marylynn has helped me to avoid. I am therefore very grateful to her. Just one example is Cowper's Summer House (formerly used by Thomas Asprey, the local apothecary, as a smoking room) in the garden behind Orchard Side. Many imagine Newton, during his Olney years, conversing there with his good friend Cowper - but Cowper did not obtain access to this little quaint building until after Newton's time as curate of the parish.

I also wish to thank Mr B A Ramsbottom for his encouragement over the years in respect to writing and publishing; friends and staff of the Cowper and Newton Museum for advice, and permission to reproduce some of the photos I have used; David Purvis of olneyart.co.uk for permission to use his painting of Cowper arriving in Olney; and Katie, Olney parish church secretary for consent to use photos of the Newton window.

Lastly, I am grateful to the publications committee of the Gospel Standard Trust for their willingness to publish this book.

Introduction

This book is not intended to be yet another biography of either John Newton or William Cowper. To borrow a phrase from the best Book of all, we can say that ‘of the making of many books,’ recounting the lives of these two close friends, that ‘there is no end.’ There are many excellent publications available by which the reader can learn more.

The first purpose is to draw attention to Olney, a small rural town in the northeast corner of Buckinghamshire, cheek by jowl with both Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire. To a large extent it remains unspoilt and retains its old-world quaintness, with many evidences of its former importance as a popular staging post for those traversing the country from Oxford to Cambridge, or travelling north from London to Coventry and beyond. For this reason, in former times there were public houses every fifty yards, some of which remain to this day.

It is not hard to imagine Newton stepping out of the attractive Georgian vicarage front door and passing through the elaborate church gates on his way to minister the Word of Life to a crowded congregation; or the celebrated Cowper, working tirelessly in the garden at Orchard Side with, perhaps, lines of a new hymn or poem running through his mind.

Since this book centres upon Olney, both Newton and Cowper’s life and experience before they arrived in the town are considered only in brief; and likewise, the years they spent after they moved elsewhere are not covered in detail.

Thousands must pass through Olney today without realising just how much this town has been blessed over the centuries. This leads us to the second theme, that of grace – the free, unmerited favour of God towards sinners. While the godly curate and the gentle poet feature largely in this book, numerous others are brought to our attention that likewise experienced God’s grace in salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ. Newton’s time at

Olney: The Home of Amazing Grace

Olney features as an important episode in 18th century church history, yet the vast majority of Newton's hearers are entirely unknown to us today. Many are now just names that appear in a parish register or on a fading headstone somewhere in a quiet churchyard. But all who found grace, as Newton and Cowper did, have their names written in heaven, though while on earth many of them endured grinding poverty and distressing hardships.

Woven into the fabric of this story of grace are the records of people, young and old, who were blessed when seasons of spiritual refreshment were sent from above. How brightly the glory of the gospel shone in Olney and its surrounding villages and hamlets! Whether you think of the parish church (now visited by people from all over the globe), or the Independent or Baptist meetings, a remarkable influence for good was exerted.

And then there's the hymn, 'Amazing Grace', widely sung and dearly loved throughout the world. It is grand because of its simplicity, expressing profound truth and vital experience. Its author's aim was not to impress the world of art and literature, nor to gain world-wide fame, but from his own sense of gratitude to the Lord, whom he had come to know, he sought to convey the good news of salvation which he had experienced for himself.

In God's sovereignty the British Isles have been exceptionally favoured with gospel light, and some towns and villages in particular. The purpose therefore of this book is to demonstrate how greatly blessed Olney has been, especially during the time of John Newton's labours. The intention is to glorify God by obeying the exhortation of the Psalmist, 'Declare his deeds among the people,' and 'talk of all his wondrous works.' Psalm 105.1-2.

Graham Chewter,
Kempston, Beds

A Little Town with a Large Legacy

'I have much people in this city' (Acts 18.10)

Having been encouraged to sing 'Amazing Grace' on Sunday 1st January 2023, many churches worldwide commemorated the 250th Anniversary of the first occasion that John Newton's renowned hymn was sung - Friday 1st January 1773. Though other hymns have been sung the world over, such as Augustus Toplady's beautiful hymn of gospel testimony, 'Rock of ages cleft for me' and Henry Lyte's rousing, 'Praise my soul the King of heaven,' there can be little doubt Newton's is the most famous. It has been translated into at least fifty languages, and not only into the most widely spoken tongues but even those as diverse as Inuit and Cherokee. Popularised by William Walker's tune *New Britain*, it is estimated that today it is sung ten million times each year, and is regarded by many Americans as a spiritual national anthem. It has appeared in over 1,000 published hymnals. This is not to suggest that merely singing the words is pleasing or honouring to God, for true praise must come from a heart renewed by grace, yet it gives some indication of its worldwide impact.

Here in England during the 1970's it reached number one in the popular music charts. As Cliff Knight observes in his *Companion to Christian Hymns*:

Modern youngsters were singing it, bus conductors were whistling it, milkmen humming it, and supermarkets playing it as background music. Where it suddenly came from is a bit of a mystery. One story has it that the band of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards were making an LP of pipe music and added 'Amazing Grace' merely to fill up the record. The LP was played on the BBC who were besieged with requests that it be issued as a single. Whatever the source, the hymn certainly took this country by storm in 1972.

Olney: The Home of Amazing Grace

I can remember, in boyhood days, hearing worldly people sing the hymn while they were working, one of them posing the question, ‘Do you sing that one at chapel?’ The answer of course was, ‘Yes.’

Bruce Hindmarsh, in his thoroughly researched account of Newton, gives a poignant description of the Swissair Flight 111 of 2nd September 1998, which crashed into the Atlantic Ocean just off the coast of Nova Scotia, killing all 229 people on board:

The grief of the family members who gathered at the small village of Peggy’s Cove and looked out over the rocks toward the waves where their loved ones had died was unspeakable. Then in the midst of all this sorrow, a family spontaneously began to sing ‘Amazing Grace,’ and everyone at the water’s edge, including the firemen and rescue workers, were transfixed until the hymn was finished.

Little could its author have imagined, not only how popular it would become, but the encouragement it would bring even in times of searing pain and grief.

And then, of more recent memory, when the coronavirus pandemic broke out and spread so rapidly across the world at the beginning of 2020, claiming the lives of some millions, a Church of England minister took to the streets of London on Easter Sunday. All the churches were closed by legal enforcement. Every citizen was required to stay at home apart from essential needs or one hour of exercise. ‘Amazing Grace’ was broadcast by means of a powerful public address system followed by prayer. Intrigued residents stood in their doorways or hung their heads out of upstairs windows to listen or to sing along. Many spontaneously clapped at the end to express their appreciation.

All these examples stand as testimonies to the abiding worth of this hymn even in these irreligious days.

A Little Town with a Large Legacy

Olney is situated close to a sweeping turn of the meandering Great Ouse. It is a small market town and civil parish in the borough of Milton Keynes on the north-east border of Buckinghamshire, with a population today of around 6,500 people. The first recorded mention of the town is found in a Saxon charter of 979, but archaeological finds reveal that 'Ouldney,' as it was once known, had been inhabited for many centuries before.

Tradition has it that Olney's famed annual Shrove Tuesday pancake race began in 1445, and it has continued with few interruptions until the present day. Quite where the start line used to be is uncertain but the women, dressed in the compulsory skirt, apron and head covering, finish at the church door with a final toss of the pancakes. This is followed by a well-attended Shrivings Service during which 'Amazing Grace' and other well-known Olney hymns are sung.



Pancake race emblem

The centre of the town shows little evidence of change since those notable men, Newton the tireless pastor, and Cowper the gentle poet, resided here. It is just 12 miles from Northampton, where the worthy Dr Doddridge laboured, and 15 from Bedford, the hometown of the celebrated tinker John Bunyan.

Olney: The Home of Amazing Grace

Because the road from Cambridge to Oxford passed through Olney, biblical truths rediscovered during the Reformation reached the town and surrounding villages at an early stage. During the latter decades of the 16th century, the severe persecution of believers in France led to the first wave of Huguenots arriving on British shores. Reading the Bible had been forbidden in France; men were beheaded for attending religious meetings, women burnt alive, and few Catholic homes would have sheltered them, for they too were threatened by death for so doing. Now on English soil, some refugees made their way into Buckinghamshire, settling at Newport Pagnell, Olney, and Buckingham. Archbishop Parker thought highly of them: 'The refugees were as godly on the sabbath days as they were industrious on weekdays,' he said, adding that such 'profitable and gentle strangers ought to be welcome and not to be grudged at.' Under Philip II's reign of terror over 100,000 Protestants emigrated to England, where they were generally received with every kindness, and in many towns subscriptions were raised for them. France foolishly was denuding itself of its very best citizens. Here the Huguenots could establish their homes, bring up their families in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and ply their trades.

By these events Olney was blessed with a sizable number of inhabitants with Puritan sympathies. Since they came from the Continental lace-making centres (such as Mechlin, Brussels, Lille, Arras, Chantilly and Alencon) to a flax-growing area, they reinforced and expanded the existing lace-making skills of the county. The lace they brought with them was regarded by the English with wonder and admiration. They also introduced new vegetables – carrots, cabbages, and celery as well as parsnips and turnips. In time, it could be reported that almost every village and town within a 30-mile radius of Olney had people with French Huguenot names. Ominously, not all were pleased at their settlement, for a letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury, possibly from the Bishop of Lincoln, states that, 'This corner of the diocese, being most distant, is much suspected of Puritanism.'

A Little Town with a Large Legacy

Sadly, these new-found freedoms under the reign of Elizabeth I would be overturned when Charles I became king in 1625, especially when the persecuting Archbishop, William Laud came to power. Being a key advocate of the king's efforts to enforce uniformity throughout the land, he was the means of forcing many believers to seek refuge in the New World.

As many as 26,000 from England over a 20-year period from 1620 to 1640 left these shores. In 1635 John Cooper of Olney and his family, with around a dozen other families from the neighbourhood, crossed the Atlantic on the *Hopewell* to obtain freedom of worship in Boston, New England. Three years earlier Thomas Olney left the town, emigrating to Rhode Island. He, with others (including Roger Williams, a Baptist theologian) purchased land from the Native Americans, and in gratitude to a delivering God they named their new settlement Providence.

Philip Kirtland, a 21-year-old shoemaker, with his brother Nathaniel of nearby Sherington, was also driven away by persecution. He emigrated to Lynn, Massachusetts, and founded the enormous trade in boots and shoes for which that city became famous. The vicar of Olney, William Worcester, likewise left. Disenchanted with Laud's attempts to impose High-Church forms of worship, and appalled by King Charles' *Book of Sports*, which approved the desecration of the sabbath, he emigrated in 1639 and was appointed first minister of Salisbury, Massachusetts. He remained in that post until his death in 1662.

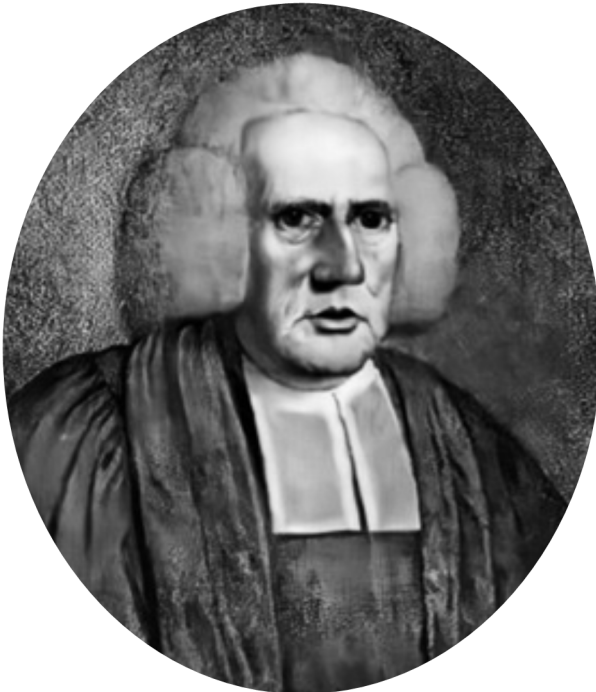
There appears to have been little sympathy for the King and the Archbishop's draconian measures in Olney, for the town quite distinctively took the side of Parliament during Cromwell's time.

Moses Browne (1703-1787), a pen-cutter of Clerkenwell and later, a poet, devotional writer, and an earnest Evangelical clergyman was appointed vicar of Olney in 1753 on the instigation of Lady Huntingdon and with the support of James Hervey, the godly minister of the Northamptonshire villages of Weston Favell and Collingtree. With a growing family of a

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'baker's dozen,' Browne found the salary insufficient to support them all. He therefore accepted the position of chaplain of Morden College, Blackheath (which provided accommodation for poor merchants), so the need arose for a new minister at Olney. This proved to be the opening of a 'great door and effectual' for the ministry of the now famous former slave-trader John Newton who, through his diaries, letters, and his and Cowper's hymns, has left us a valuable spiritual legacy.

With its impressive 185-foot tower, the Church of St Peter and St Paul dominates the southern approach to the town. This 14th-century decorated Gothic church, on the banks of the river, was to become a spiritual oasis to many through the fervent and faithful ministry of the once blasphemous sea captain.



Moses Browne