

James Bradley, third Astronomer Royal at Greenwich A Biographical Note

If using the web to study Bradley and his achievements it is relatively easy to learn that he died 13th July, 1762. But there is less precision about his birth and most biographies cite "March 1693" or "Late March 1693" as his date of birth.

I decided to look into his birth in two steps -

- 1) Find the source of the March 1693 date, and
- 2) See if the Gloucestershire Archives have a record of his birth - he having been born in Sherborne in that county.

I believe that the prime source of the March 1693 date is related to research carried out by Stephen Rigaud (1774-1839), Professor of Mathematics at Oxford. In 1832 Rigaud published a book "Miscellaneous Works and Correspondence of the Rev James Bradley D.D. F.R.S.". Rigaud prefaces this book with his own biography of Bradley. He discovered that the parish registers for Bradley's birthplace, Sherborne, were missing for the years 1690-1703. He explains that this was due to the parish church being rebuilt. He then arrives at a potential date of birth by working backwards from Bradley's matriculation to Balliol College. The records state that he was in his 18th year at the time. Rigaud's analysis is rigorous and he arrives at a small group of dates for Bradley's birth, these being from the 16th to the 24th of March 1693, inclusive. [Note that Bradley matriculated on the 15th March 1710 and 10 days later the date would have been 25th March 1711 - both of these quoted dates being Old Style. However, the - proposed - dates in March 1693 are quoted as New Style].

I then turned to the second step outlined above and I contacted Gloucestershire Archives directly. For although Rigaud had been unable to find these registers perhaps with the integration of all registers at the archive they have turned up.

I received a very detailed response from the archives telling me how to access their records and also noting that they had done some initial searching. Their initial searching showed that the records for 1690-1703 were still missing from the registers!

However, as all of the Gloucestershire records are available in a scanned form on the "Ancestry" website I started systematically searching through

them. I was rewarded as I found the entry for Bradley's baptism along with the baptisms of several of his siblings. His entry reads "James the Son of William Bradley and Jane his wife was Baptised October 3rd 1692".

This entry is in the Bishop's Transcripts for Sherborne. In 1598 Parliament passed an Act which stated that "copies are to be made of the Parish Registers and submitted to the Bishop each month". These copies are called "Bishop's Transcripts" and their purpose was to have a backup in the event that the originals became lost or damaged in some way. In the case of Bradley's birth it is the transcripts that have survived. Either Rigaud was not aware of their existence or he believed that no records were being kept whilst the church was being rebuilt. (It's possible they were using a separate register during this time and that register has become misplaced).

Following this discovery I have re-examined all the biographies of Bradley that I can find on the web. One of them contains this 1692 date, and that is the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

I am certain that this is the correct entry for Bradley. It does, of course, only give us a baptism date but this was usually fairly soon after the actual birth - typically about a week. It was also common practice to record family events on the flyleaf of the family Bible so it is possible that Bradley's actual date of birth was entered there.

If the baptismal date of October 3rd 1692 is correct it is impossible for Bradley to have been born in 1693 and therefore Bradley would have been quoting an incorrect age when he matriculated to Balliol College. If his birth was relatively close to his baptismal date he would have been in his 19th year and not his 18th year when he matriculated (about 18 $\frac{1}{2}$ years of age). I don't, personally, have a problem with such an error as I have been doing family history research for around 10 years now and ages given in such events as the 10 year Census are regularly in error, many times being [at least] one year out.

Bruce Vickery, 6th February 2016