



Portrait of the Month: November Revd. William Bull (1738-1814)

by an unknown artist

Independent minister and President of the Newport Pagnell Academy – which he founded in his own house, and which merged with Cheshunt College in 1850.



William Bull, by an unknown artist
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William Bull was born in 1738, and even as a child he wanted to enter Nonconformist ministry. After studying at Daventry Academy, the successor to Philip Doddridge's Academy, he was ordained as minister of the chapel at Newport Pagnell in 1764.

He started a boys' school in the town, but when he became friends in the 1770s with Newton and Cowper (the authors of *Amazing Grace* and the *Olney hymns*), Newton suggested to him that a Dissenting Academy for preachers should be take its place. Newton then wrote a description of how such an academy should be run ("A Plan of Academical Preparation for the Ministry, in a Letter to a Friend", 1782) which formed the basis for the Academy. In a letter to Bull on 25th May 1782, Newton said the students should be "serious,

capable, and having desires already towards the ministry upon just and solid grounds" – and went on to describe what he thought the Tutor for the students should be like. And then Newton confessed that, in describing the tutor, he had written about Bull, saying: "it is your picture drawn from the life" (FW Bull, *TCHS* 1909).

Having previously taught individual ministerial students, Bull agreed, and in 1783 the Academy was opened. Thomas Palmer Bull joined him as a second tutor; his son, Josiah Bull, also taught at the Academy in his turn. As it was based in William Bull's own home, the Academy was never large in size of classes; but it was funded by the generous donation of John Thornton, a banker from Clapham and supporter of the Evangelical cause, who endowed the Academy with £200 a year.

William Bull died in 1814, and the Church Book records that this time his initial congregation had grown sevenfold, to number 115 congregants. The ministry at Newport Pagnell was taken over by his son. In 1850, the decision was taken to close the Academy, and it was amalgamated with Cheshunt College.

Portrait by an unknown artist.

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Helen Weller, Archivist
2021

Bibliography and Further Reading:

'The Newport Pagnell Academy', by F. W. Bull, in *Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society* (1909–10), pp305-322

'History of the Congregational Church at Newport Pagnell', by F. W. Bull, in *Transactions of the Congregational Historical Society* (1909–10), pp260-271

'Bull, William (bap. 1738, d. 1814)', by M. J. Mercer, in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004);

'Newport Pagnell Academy (1783-1850)', by Stephen Orchard, on *Dissenting Academies Online: Database and Encyclopaedia* (Dr. Williams's Library, July 2011).