

February 23rd

Memory Verse:

Thou therefore **endure hardness,**
as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. 2 Timothy 2:3

See yesterday's lesson for more information on this verse.

Keeping up your diary



Today is a good day for me to remind you to keep up with your diary. Even if you have let it lapse after your good intentions on 1st January, you can still go back to it. Many of the diaries that are most useful to historians have gaps in them. Why is **23rd February** a good day to be thinking about your diary? Because it is the birthday of the most famous diarist that ever lived – Samuel Pepys (1633-1703). You can read about him on 4th May, 28th May, 2nd September and 25th and 28th December.

Some ancient history to read¹



The picture on the left shows the remains of a bust of the Roman Emperor Diocletian (242-311AD) wearing a laurel crown. When he became emperor in 284AD the Roman Empire had suffered fifty years of anarchy, barbarian invasions and economic disorder which resulted in famine and plague which almost destroyed it.

Diocletian was ruthless and determined to restore the Roman Empire to its former glory. He did restore the empire to order but in the process it became a totalitarian state, ruled by a dictator.

Diocletian began by delegating. He chose Maximian as joint-emperor and later selected two subordinates or “Caesars” so that the empire was ruled in four sections which were each divided up again into twelve dioceses and many small provinces. Rome was far from the frontiers of the empire but the four new capital cities were much closer and could exercise more effective control. Diocletian also made the army much bigger and set up an elite mobile force which could be rushed to any point in the empire that was in danger.

Diocletian needed money to finance all this and so he introduced very heavy taxes which were to be paid mostly in goods. In fact the taxes were so heavy that people began to give up their trades and farms to avoid paying so he made it illegal to change your trade or give up your farm. The result was inflation about which we will be learning more next month.² For now, all you need to know is that inflation means prices rise. To try to stem the rising prices Diocletian reformed the currency but this did not have the desired effect. Diocletian therefore fixed maximum prices for food and clothing.

Imagine living in such a society. You have to pay a huge tax which swallows up most of the goods or crops you produce. You cannot change your job or charge more for what you sell to make up the

¹ Image: Attribution, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=26323391>

² See the lesson for 13th March.

difference. If you have savings, inflation is wiping them out. You are therefore facing debt and probably starvation unless you sell yourself into slavery. How could the emperor exercise such control without rebellions?

Diocletian imposed iron discipline throughout the empire to carry out this policy. Christians who would not participate in the state worship of pagan gods were seen as a threat to Diocletian's discipline and so he unleashed persecution on them, beginning with the destruction of the Christian church in Nicomedia, on **February 23rd** 303AD. Here is how John Fox describes it in his *Acts and Monuments*. I have **highlighted** some words that you might want to look up in your dictionary.

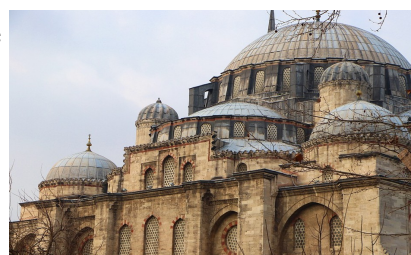
The fatal day fixed upon to commence the bloody work, was **the twenty-third of February**, A.D. 303, that being the day in which the Terminalia [festivals of the god of boundaries] were celebrated, and on which, as the cruel pagans boasted, they hoped to put a termination to Christianity.

On the appointed day, the persecution began in Nicomedia, on the morning of which the prefect of that city **repaired**, with a great number of officers and assistants, to the church of the Christians, where, having forced open the doors, they seized upon all the sacred books, and committed them to the flames.

The whole of this **transaction** was in the presence of Diocletian and Galerius [his son], who, not contented with burning the books, had the church levelled with the ground. This was followed by a severe edict, commanding the destruction of all other Christian churches and books; and an order soon succeeded, to render Christians of all denomination outlaws...

All the Christians were apprehended and imprisoned; and Galerius privately ordered the imperial palace to be set on fire, that the Christians might be charged as the **incendiaries**, and a plausible pretence given for carrying on the persecution with the greater severities. A general sacrifice was commenced, which occasioned various martyrdoms. No distinction was made of age or sex; the name of Christian was so **obnoxious** to the pagans that all indiscriminately fell sacrifices to their opinions... The persecution became general in all the Roman provinces, but more particularly in the east; and as it lasted ten years, it is impossible to **ascertain** the numbers martyred, or to **enumerate** the various **modes** of martyrdom.

Diocletian retired from being emperor after ruling for 21 years. He lived quietly in a palace at Split for the rest of his life. But what happened to the empire and the Christians? Find out in the lesson for July 25th!



Many years later, in 532 the Emperor Justinian I laid the foundation stone of a new basilica or church building on **23rd February**. This domed building in Constantinople (near Nicomedia) was the Hagia Sophia which is still standing today. We will be looking at it in detail in the lesson for May 29th.

Something to listen to³

Today's date gives us the opportunity to listen to two completely contrasting pieces of music.

On **23rd February** 1759 George Frederick Handel (1685-1759), now completely blind, died in his home at Brook Street, Mayfair where he had lived for over thirty years and written (and even

³ Information from CLARKE, MARTIN V. "CHARLES WESLEY, METHODISM AND NEW ART MUSIC IN THE LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY." *Eighteenth Century Music* 18, no. 2 (2021): 271-93. doi:10.1017/S1478570621000117 and other sources.

rehearsed) some of his greatest works. On his death Charles Wesley wrote of his music:

Here all the mystic powers of sound
The soul of harmony is found
Its perfect character receives,
And Handel dead for ever lives.

If you did the lesson earlier this month about William Boyce⁴ you might remember Wesley's poem on the death of his friend Boyce in which he mentions Handel. By this time Handel was already dead and Wesley pictures Boyce joining him in heaven:

Where Handel strikes the warbling strings,
And plausive⁵ angels clap their wings.

Wesley also wrote in praise of Handel's music:

Hail the bright auspicious day
That gave immortal Handel birth
Let every moment glide away
In solemn joy and sacred mirth;
Let every soul like his aspire
And catch a glowing spark of pure ethereal fire.



Although there is no evidence that Wesley ever knew Handel personally, and Handel was certainly not a Methodist, Wesley clearly held him in high esteem both musically and spiritually. We will be listening to several of Handel's works during the course of our lessons this year.⁶ Today you could find a recording of “The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba” from his oratorio “Solomon” to listen to. It is one of his most popular pieces of music and has been performed in all sorts of arrangements ever since Handel's day. Look out for a performance that tries to recreate the sounds that Handel would have heard – and intended – himself.⁷

Handel came from Germany but he liked England so much that he obtained citizenship and became an Englishman. On 23rd February 1934 another famous English composer died. Sir Edward Elgar (1857-1934) is most famous for his “Enigma Variations”.



We will be looking at variations by a some other composers in forthcoming lessons.⁸ A composer writing variations has a theme, sometimes his own, sometimes written by someone else, which he generally presents at the beginning. Then he takes the theme and repeats it but in an altered form. He may decorate it, or give it new harmony or change the pattern of the rhythm. Another variation follows and so on until there is a whole set. There are fourteen variations in Elgar's “Enigma Variations” each one bearing on the score the initials or nickname of one of his friends. He dedicated the piece to

“My Friends Pictured Within” and each variation reflects the character of the person whose initials it bears. Elgar called his theme “Enigma” which means a mystery. This prompted speculation that the theme itself is a kind of variation on something by another composer. Musicians have been

4 See the lesson for 7th February.

5 Can you find out what “plausive” and “ethereal” mean?

6 See the lessons for 23rd March, 14th April, 19th July and 10th October.

7 For instance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9FaoRJAglI&t=116s>

8 See the lessons for September 23rd and December 4th.

guessing ever since, proposing everything from “God Save the King” to “Rule Britannia” but no solution is so obvious and perfect as to be totally convincing. The ninth variation, “Nimrod,” is the most popular. Try to listen to a performance of it.⁹

When you have listened to both pieces of music you will understand why I say they are completely contrasting. Can you think of one word that would sum up the character of each?

9 For instance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sUgoBb8m1eE>