

## A Glimpse of Ancient Friends in Dorset.<sup>1</sup>

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“ Our fathers were high-minded men,  
Who nobly kept the faith ;  
To freedom and to conscience true,  
In suffering and in death.”

This verse rises unbidden to my memory as I con- sider the ancient records that were kept with such care by the Friends in the seventeenth century. Life to them was not easy but one continual struggle against that which they felt to be wrong, and with which they could therefore make no compromise. There is an intense interest in diving into these records. Having had an opportunity, last winter, of going carefully through the Minute Books of the Dorsetshire Q.M. and Dorset and Hants General Meeting, I have felt a desire to share with others the interest and stimulus I found there. Most of the information in this paper has been culled from these and the Dorset Book of Sufferings ; but when once started on any particular phase of the subject, I have gained further light from what other sources I could. It seems appropriate, now we are meeting in Dorsetshire, and are at this minute on land intimately connected with one of the earliest Friends in Dorset, that we should pause in the midst of our deeper intellectual studies to take a little dip into this bit of ancient history.

The first account that we have of the entry of Quakerism into this county is written at the end of the Dorset Q.M. book. It was penned in 1680, in response to a request from Friends in London<sup>2</sup> asking for particulars of the introduction of Quakerism into the various parts of the country, and runs thus :—

Att our Mens Meetinge y<sup>e</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> of y<sup>e</sup> first Month, 1680.

Let y<sup>e</sup> Many Vissitations of y<sup>e</sup> Lords loue & kindness to vs ward be had in Continuall Remembrance.

The first freinds that Visseted us in y<sup>e</sup> loue of God ; And pre[ached] amongst us y<sup>e</sup> Gospell of glad Tydeings was our Dear freinde George ffox and Edward Pyatt whome the Lord Sent amongst vs and their Testimony

<sup>1</sup> Paper read at the Summer School at Bridport, 1907.

<sup>2</sup> See Preface to *F.P.T.*

proued Effectuall whoe at first when they Came to towne Enquired f[or] Seperated people and so went to a Baptist Meetinge att which time many were Convinced amongst of which William Bayly was one (who became an able minister of the Gosple amongst vs) with Tenn or Eleauen more ; Some of wh[ich] remayne alive to this day. The next that Came were John Scafe and William Beaton as wee well Remember and sometime after Came William Dewsbu[ry] in the liueinge power of God ; Dear Humphry Smith Ca[me] after and was very Serviceable heere to y<sup>e</sup> Convineeinge Confirminge of Seuerall who yet remayne as monum[ents] of y<sup>e</sup> Lords Mercy and neuer to be forgotten loue ; Glory to God for Euer and at his first Comeinge, was taken out of a Meetinge and Carryed to prison with a drum beatinge before him and remayned for a whole night in a nasty place or prison: John Moone [or, Moore] was also one of them that in the first breakinge forth of Truth vissited vs & also Ambrose Rigg. And both their Testimony very serviceable, besides others not heere Mentioned.

But as to the Sufferinges of ffreinds in this place Jt have not as yet binn much. And the persecutors that then were, they are moste of them dead.

This visit of George Fox to Poole was in 1655, and Poole seems to have been the very first place in Dorset touched, but others were not long behind.

In the following year, 1656, Quakerism penetrated to Bridport. Matthew Thomas, a North Country Friend, was brought to the Quarter Sessions at Bridport, having been apprehended as a wanderer, and he used his time of detention in the inn in preaching, by which many were convinced. Sarah Collier is believed to have been the very first individual to receive " the Truth " there, but amongst those reached were Thomas Bagg, with his mother, Love, and sisters, Sarah, Mary, and Abigail. As I shall have occasion to refer to these Friends again, I will not enter into more detail about them now.

In the same year, 1656, Weymouth had a visit from George Fox as well as from several other well known Friends ; Humphrey Smith went on to Sherborne, where many were convinced.

The following year, 1657, George Fox and Thomas Curtis visited Bridport, and Thomas Curtis, coming again later in the year, established a First Day meeting. Humphrey Smith, William Dewsbury, George Bewley, and two other Friends visited them that year.

Persecution began almost at once. People could not understand this strange people, and in the Book of Suffer-

ings we find that the indictments were very various under which they suffered.<sup>3</sup> They may be classed as follows :— (1) For going to steeplehouses to declare the Truth ; (2) For not attending worship at steeplehouses ; (3) For being vagabonds ; (4) For not putting off the hat ; (5) For travelling on the highway ; (6) For meeting and going to Meeting ; (7) For not paying tithes ; (8) For not paying towards repairing steeplehouses ; (9) For standing in the street ; (10) For refusing to swear.

Some of these we can quite understand. Although it was not an unusual thing in those days for a stranger to go into the steeplehouse and speak when the minister had finished, yet it must have been very aggravating to those who believed in their own creed and methods, to have these Quakers come in and denounce them in such very searching and bold language as we know they did, and we can hardly be surprised at their resenting it, and using against them the very harsh treatment which the law dealt out so liberally in those days to any who did not happen to coincide with the party at that time in power. We can also understand the fright they took at the refusal of Friends to swear, when there was so much unrest and rebellion afloat, and they could not grasp the fact that these men were obeying a higher law than the one which they were themselves obeying. A heart religion, an allegiance to the will of God as above man's decrees, they could not understand. The putting off of the hat was to them but another symptom of the insurrectionary spirit, which would not be subordinated to the king, and to those who represented him in the Courts. But we feel that they must indeed have been hard up, to find it necessary to imprison for such very small offences as some of the indictments were, if they can be called offences at all. The charge of vagabondry and standing in the street seem some of the most trivial. And yet to these Friends it was a very serious matter. They had a keen sense of their duty to one another, and of the way in which they ought to attend the different meetings in the neighbourhood, but when they did this, they had to do it at the risk of being taken into custody for it, or otherwise ill-used.

<sup>3</sup> See art. on "Penal Laws affecting Early Friends," in *F.P.T.*

In the year 1657, we find that some Friends going to, and returning from a meeting at Sherborne, were so abused that they had to retire to an inn, where they "tarried all night till the 4th hour of the morning."

1659, Hannah Guyer, of East Coker, was returning from a meeting at South Perrott. When she reached Hardington,

she was set vpon, & most wickedly abused & Dragged vp & downe, & much dirted, & otherwise abused in words after a barbarous manner by Ralph Gillam alias Delamont, and William Bampfild alias Bonvill, of ye same parish & County aforesayde, shee never giveing them any provocation, But because shee was Jn scorn Called a Quaker & having been at a Meeting of ye Lords people 5 Miles from her own habitation.

She was finally sent home with a pass.

In 1658, three Friends, called Josiah Limbery, George Fry, and Thomas Sprague, went eight miles from home, to attend a meeting at Bridport. For this they were put into prison for some time, and then into the stocks.

In 1657, a Friend, George Bewley, was taken to the Town Hall at Bridport, there to be examined. As Friends naturally took much interest in the case, they assembled outside to know what was being done, and, if possible, to help him. This was taken as creating a disturbance, and they were pushed, hustled, and abused, and finally, after some of them had been very severely handled, three of them were sent to prison, three of them were badly beaten, and, a few days afterwards, a woman who had been there was apprehended and put in the stocks. The prisoners were kept in prison *a year* before they were released.

In the year 1659, a General Meeting of Friends was held at Cerne. The Dorset Book of Sufferings records this Meeting upon its first page, the book being headed thus :—

A

True & faythfull Record of ye Sufferings of ye Lords people  
Belonging to severall Meetings Jn ye County of Dorsett,  
As alsoe

The place where, & for What ye sufferings were, & ye manner how  
& by whom their Sufferings were Caused, with ye day, month,  
& yeare wherein it was Done; Being faythfully Collected  
And Recorded as a Testimoney to After Generations  
Against the Persecutors.



Besides the many and great Sufferings wch the Lords  
 people by this generation Jn this Countye haue  
 already suffered, and being already printed  
 And put forth to publique View,  
 Js not here Jnserted.

Being Written & Recorded by ye order & advice of the  
 Lords people at their Generale Meeting at Broad Cerne,  
 ye 18th day of ye 6th Month, 1659.

Notwithstanding all these persecutions, Friends grew considerably in numbers, and, in 1668, Discipline was established amongst them. George Fox was at this time visiting about the country with the view of settling Meetings for Discipline in different parts, and he was present at the first Meeting held in Dorset. It took place at Ryme, and Friends were present from sixteen different Meetings, among the places being Weymouth, Poole and Morden, Dorchester, Blandford, Milton Abbas, Cerne, Ryme and Berwick, Batcombe and Evershot, Bradford, Longburton, Bridport, Hawkchurch, Lyme. Each of these places was represented by three or more Friends. We see from this list how Quakerism had spread its branches right through the county, and we find that many places where Friends were then living are not mentioned here by name. For instance, William Scott, who is said to be a representative from Longburton, really lived at Sherborne, and many other smaller places are mentioned in the Book of Sufferings.

Of the forty-nine Friends who gathered together on this occasion, we know that eleven had already seen the interior of a prison, and probably many more, as we have information that in the years previous to 1668, when this Meeting was held, seventy-three Friends of Dorset were in prison at the same time. We have the names and records of sixty-five Friends, during the years 1656-1660, who underwent imprisonment, without reckoning those who suffered restraints, whipping, insults, and abuse. Their character may be gathered from the following, which is inscribed on the flyleaf of the Minute Book, showing the very great care that was felt to be necessary that the right Friends should be present at such meetings:—

Aduice of o<sup>r</sup> friend & Elder Brother in ye Truth, George ffox, concerning such as become Members of o<sup>r</sup> Monthly & Quarterly Meetings, what Persons they ought to bee, & how quallified for the seruice of such

Meetings, *viz.* : Monthly & Quarterly Meetings should be made up of two or three from every particular Meeting, of such as are weighty, seasoned, faithful friends, yt understands ye buisness of ye Church, & yt can give a Testimony of your Sufferings, & likewise how things are amongst you in every particular Meeting, for no unseasoned persons should goe to ye Quarterly Meetings, nor indeed to ye Monthly Meetings, but such as are single-hearted, seasoned, & honest . . . for friends fellowship must be in ye Spiritt & Power of God, which is the authoritye of these meetings,

and there is added, in fainter and different handwriting, " Jn wch they were at first sett up." At the bottom of the first page of the Minute Book is added the following, by another hand:—

Note yt at this meeting was o<sup>r</sup> Deer friend & Elder Brother in ye Truth, George ffox, who was then traulling through ye nation (being moued of ye Lord thereunto) Jn order to the settleing of both Monthly & Quarterly Meetings amongst friends in their respective Countyes, wch work ye Lord blest & prospered in his hands, whereby ye Churches of Christ came to be established in ye good order & Discipline of ye Truth to their mutuall Cumfurt and Eddification therein.

At this first Meeting for Discipline, it was decided to form two Monthly Meetings, the first one to comprise the above first six Meetings, and to be held at Thomas Strong's at Dorchester ; the other to comprise the remaining seven places, the first meeting to be held at Francis Williams's, at Bridport. In addition to these Monthly Meetings, a Quarterly Meeting was to be held " once in Every Quarter of a Year for and concerning the poor & other affairs of Truth." The first of these was to be held at Dorchester ; " & so to be appointed quarterly at such places as may be most convenient for Friends to meet in."

The very first Monthly Meeting was held at Bridport, 20th of Seventh Month, 1668. A book was immediately procured, and the first four entries made refer to the Monthly Meetings which were held before the date fixed for the Quarterly Meeting. This was evidently felt to be burdensome, and at the Quarterly Meeting, which was held at " ye Shipp " in Dorchester, it was decided that at present there should be only one meeting held in between whiles, and that should be for the whole county.

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*To be continued.*