

The Somerby Estate,

THE CHIEF ENDOWED PROPERTY OF THE QUARTERLY
MEETING OF LEICESTER AND RUTLAND.

On one of the grassy uplands of East Leicestershire, a favourite resort of the fox-hunting fraternity, stands the village of Somerby. The traveller who approaches it from the little wayside station of "John o' Gaunt" (three miles away over the shoulder of Burrough Hill) sees before him a long, winding village street, abutting upon which is a substantial residence known as Somerby House. Incorporated with the grounds of this house is a strip of land which formerly belonged to the Society of Friends; and though not a trace remains of the dwelling used as a Meeting House which stood upon it, yet the position of the Burial Ground is still discoverable by its surrounding belt of fine trees.

For the sake of any who may wish, in days to come, to identify the site, it may be well to state that a line drawn in a southerly direction from the gate leading to the stable yard of Somerby House, gives approximately the western boundary of the Friends' plot. The present owner of the property has recently planted upon the Burial Ground a number of small fir trees—having first raised the level by adding a considerable quantity of earth, in order to comply with a clause in the deeds, which guards against the disturbance of the soil.

The late Mary Radley,¹ of Warwick, carefully searched out the history of the Somerby Estate, and shortly before

¹ Mary Radley (c. 1829-1902) was the daughter of Eli and Louisa Radley, of Tottenham. She was much interested in making researches into Friends' records, and was familiar with documents at Somerset House and the Record Office as well as at Devonshire House. During the last few years of her life she resided at the Meeting House at Warwick, and her body was laid to rest in the graveyard attached, near to the place where the remains of William Dewsbury were buried. M. Radley prepared and printed a *List of Burials in Friends' Graveyard, Warwick, 1660 to 1879*; also a facsimile reprint of a *Testimony concerning Sarah Browne*, who died 1693. She left numerous notes on the life of Elizabeth Hooton (d. 1672). A MS. from her pen, *The Miserable History of the Smith Family of the Vale of Belvoir, 1735-1752*, is in D.

For further particulars see *The Friend* (Lond.), 1902, p. 136.

her death she presented the following paper in rough form to Leicester Monthly Meeting. Her notes have been arranged and edited for THE JOURNAL by Henrietta Ellis, of Leicester.

William Dewsbury, after his Derby and Leicester imprisonments in 1654, passed rapidly through East Leicestershire to Oakham, and thence onwards to his prolonged sufferings in Northampton Jail.² It would appear that he held a meeting at Somerby, and there fanned the flame of Quakerism, which had been kindled earlier in "The Vail" (of Belvoir) and on the wolds, by George Fox and John Wilsford.

Among his Somerby hearers, and, probably, converts, were the yeoman, William Tompson, his wife, Ann, and especially their elder son, William, then a lad of sixteen or eighteen. Two years afterwards, William Tompson died, arranging for his wife and numerous young family by a will, which, in many of its details, is an exact counterpart of Frederic Seebohm's illustrations in his *English Village Community*. As this will introduces us to our Estate, a brief summary of it may be interesting:—

November 14th, 1656.

I, William Tompson, of Somerby . . . being weak in body but perfect in memory, blessed be God, do make . . . this my last will . . . to Ann Tompson, my now wife, all my goods and chattels, whom I make my executor . . . I give to her that parcel of ground in Pickwell Lordship, 12 acres, . . . for eight years, upon condition she keep herself widow . . . if she marry, then it shall be to the use of my 5 daughters, Sarah, Ann, Mary, Susan, and Elizabeth equally, and I appoint my friend, Robert Greene, to make the best sale of it. . . . If any of my said children be not ruled and guided by their mother in their matching according to reason as may be apprehended by wise men to be for the best for themselves, my will is they shall have but 12^d. . . . At the end of 8 years my wife shall sell these 2 pastures, and pay the money therefor equally between my . . . daughters . . . as they come of age . . . in the meantime my wife is to have the use of it. . . .

To my wife that house, gardens, orchard, and the croft on the south side of that house . . . now held by Richard Woods . . . and also one Yard Land . . . in the fields of Somerby . . . with all

² So written in Mary Radley's notes. Dewsbury suffered imprisonment in *Northampton Gaol*, but his "prolonged imprisonment" was in *Warwick*.

commons . . . and common pasture . . . until my son William comes of age . . . but if she marry, it shall be to the use of my three youngest children. . .

To my son, William Tompson, and his heirs . . . for ever all the aforesaid house, etc., croft, etc., and also the aforesaid Yard Land except what I have reserved out of the same for my wife's jointure, and my son shall plow, dress, and manure the said land for my wife, if she keep her widow, and he shall do all her other work, consisting in carriage about home. And it is my will she shall have the Hall and Parlour and two Baies of the Barne at the upper end of it and regress in the yard without his hindrance.

My son, William Tompson, within 2 yeares after he enters upon his land, to pay £80 to my son, Henry Tompson, and £60 to him or her the youngest. If either child shall die before marriage their portion shall be to the rest equally except the youngest . . . and if it shall please God to take it away its portion shall cease with it.

WILLIAM  TOMPSON.
his mark.

Witnesses :—

ROBERT GREENE,
DANIEL TRIGG,
ELIZABETH EYLEFIELD,
HENRY BAXTER.

Here follows a true terrier expressing all the Lands Leyes etc., etc. . . . which I have given to my wife if she keep widow after my son comes to age.³

It will have been noticed that the testator was not resident in the homestead to which his yard-land attached, but in another and probably better house; also that part of his wife's income and his daughters' portions were upon his more marketable land, not upon his yard-land. His younger sons were to be provided for by their elder brother out of his earliest income from his yard-land, and a home was secured to the widow and, through her, to their youngest son ("the puisné"), in addition to the house in which she became a widow, by testamentary interest in some yard-land and the hall and parlour, the best end of the barn, etc., upon the yard-land homestead. And the heir to the yard-land was bound to provide labour and horses, etc., for her service.

Notwithstanding these pecuniary inducements to widowhood, and the care of a large family, "An" Tompson became the wife of William Chapman, of Somerby, and Friends' Meetings were held in their house.

³ The total area of this jointure land was 8 or 9 acres.—M. Ry.

Besse⁴, when illustrating the undue readiness of "Justices" to act upon the incorrect evidence of Informers, quotes these instances :—

In 1683, Joseph Holt and Augustine Allen being seen by the Informers one in one yard, and one in another yard near the house of W^m Chapman, where a meeting was sometimes held, they, on mere conjecture, made information of their being at a meeting there, upon which they were convicted and very heavily fined. And about the same time, Smith, the Informer, meeting John Richards on the Highway, swore what he only imagined. Richards was convicted of being at a conventicle at W^m Chapman's house (which was true, tho' Smith knew it not). Upon this, 4 cows worth £14 were taken from him.

From time to time Ann (Tompson) Chapman was the medium of conveying "Women Friends" relief to the stripped and suffering families in and about the "Vaile" of Belvoir. In 1660, her right-hand son, then perhaps twenty years of age, was sharing imprisonment with twenty-four others, "non-swearers," in Leicester Jail, and he joined in signing a remonstrance against the needless inflictions they endured. In 1675 (?) William Tompson was made one of the Trustees for John Evans's gift of Wigston Meeting House and ground. In 1679, he carried five shillings, the "Oacon" (Oakham) contribution to the Leicester Quarterly Meeting. These three are the only allusions to him during his life, which have been noticed.

By 1680 young Henry Tompson and his posthumous brother, John, were both deceased. Four of the five sisters had been married, and Elizabeth, the youngest sister, was her brother's only companion in the home, from which their mother's marriage had withdrawn her also.

William Tompson was then about forty years old. His fatal illness was perhaps sudden, for the 19th of 1st Month (March), 1680, is the date both of his will and of his death. On the 22nd his remains were laid in the little croft belonging to his hereditary Homestead. The preamble of his will, a will to which Friends are still indebted, runs thus :—

. . . My body, soul and spirit, I have given up to the Lord, with which I have glorified God, which all are the Lord's, and I have long been given up to Him, and now I do commend my Body, Soul and Spirit

⁴ *Sufferings*, i. 343.

into my Saviour's hands, for all is His and he hath been the Redeemer and Saviour of my soul. And I die in the Catholic faith of the Church of Christ my Saviour and in no Pope nor false teachers. . . . And as to the goods of this world which God in His mercy hath lent to me, I will as followeth

He made his sister, Elizabeth, his sole Executrix, and gave to her and her heirs all his moveable property, the half of his yard-land, and the house in which they then dwelt. He emphatically confirmed his mother in the advantages of his father's will, "she shall in no way be let or hindered in the profits of my fower acers in Pickwell close," and the use of the half of his yard-land for eight years. He recurred to the dower which his married sisters had received, "but as they said they had heard that their father had given to them all the Pickwell closes he freely gave to them his 4 acres to be equally divided among them on their mother's death." He gave £10 equally between his friends, Joseph Hoult and John Wilsford, to be paid from the next incomings of his land; and sixthly:—

I give and bequeath unto Joseph Holt of Oakham in ye Cty of Rt^d and William Money of Barleythorpe in ye s^d Cty the other moiety or half of my yard land with the appurtenances in Somerby as ffeffees in trust for friends of ye same faith with them called Quakers and also all and every part of ye House and homestead belonging to ye s^d House namely one little Croft or backside with all the Barns and other Buildings belonging to the s^d House and also the Garden and Orchard thereto belonging for them ye s^d Jos Holt and W^m Money or their Asignees to enter upon have hold and possess and enjoy just eight years after ye death of me W^m Thompson for the use of a Meeting Place to worship God and the backside as a burying Place to bury their Dead in for ever.

The witnesses were Robert Greene, James Trigg, Robert Greene, Jun.

Joseph Holt, the earliest Rutlandshire convert of Wm. Dewsbury and the patriarch of the Quaker Church in that county, was probably a Minister, and is frequently mentioned as the host of Ministers. He was an aged man, and died before the trusteeship devolved upon him.⁵ Wm. Money, a substantial yeoman, died almost directly after he had taken possession of the bequest, but not before he had conveyed it to trustees in 1689.

⁵ Joseph Holt died 18 v. 1688.

William Tompson's Legacy of £5 to John Wilsford⁶ was a well-timed gift. As the eloquent Minister and leading controversialist of the Quarterly Meeting, he had endured not only much imprisonment, but the utter stripping and forfeiture of his all. His wife and little ones had fled for bread to her friends in Hunts, whence he went with them to found a safer home in America—a loss to *this* Meeting, as he was an eminent gain there.

To be continued.

Meeting Records.

AT FRITCHLEY MEETING HOUSE, DERBYSHIRE.

Breach M.M., 1700-1762. At the latter date Breach M.M. was united with Chesterfield.

Women's Q.M. (Nottinghamshire Q.M. to 1761 and then Derbyshire and Notts Q.M.),¹ 1749-1793.

Original Book of Sufferings of Friends in Derbyshire.²

These books have been saved from dispersal by purchase at one or more sales of private property.

⁶ The home of John Wilsford (Willsford, Wilford) was Nether Broughton, in the Vale of Belvoir. His writings included a reply to Clement Needham's two letters written to vindicate the right of tithes, 1673; an epistle to Friends from Leicester County Jail in 1676; a recital of his sufferings, addressed to the inhabitants of Nether Broughton about the same date; and in 1680 he addressed "Bishops, Priests and Magistrates" on persecution. His emigration to West Jersey took place about 1684. In 1691, he published "A Brief Exhortation to all who profess the Truth." The date of his death does not appear.

See *The Friend* (Phila.), vols. 28, 29; *John Gratton*, pp. 55, 408.

¹ Many of the minutes and reports were drawn up and signed by Anna Coulson, who kept a school in Nottingham, and by Martha Winter, who was her assistant and successor. The latter, as Martha Routh, was a well-known Minister (1743-1817).

² The first page is headed 1661, but other entries appear 1660 and 1659. Many interesting details are given, especially down to 1680, which do not appear in Besse's *Sufferings*. Extracts from this book have appeared in *THE JOURNAL*, see v. 97n.