

Notes on Edinburgh Meeting Houses.

The earliest meeting place of the Society in Edinburgh of which we have record was the dwelling house of William Osburn, a gentleman who was at one time a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Army, but who afterwards, according to Sewel, the historian,¹ became "a zealous minister amongst the flock at Edinburgh"; this was in 1655. The small company of Friends there would seem to have continued to meet at a private house for many years; but when, in 1669, a regular system of Meetings for Discipline was established in the South of Scotland, one of the earliest cares of the Society thus newly organised was to appoint Committees of Friends residing "in the North," "the South," and "the West" of Scotland to "recommend to all particullar persons . . . who are of abilitie that they contribwtte for the bwriall place at Ed^r w^t a meeting howse . . . and if anie money be collected for y^t use it be pwt in the hands of Ja. browne, of Ed^r." "Also it is recommended to the Monthly Meeting to take caire about a meeting howse for present use." From time to time the Monthly Meeting renewed its advice on the subject, and especially as regards the Burial Ground. Thus, in Seventh Month, 1670:—

Freinds haveing had wnder consideratione that a bwrieing ground for Answering the freinds in & about Ed^r is not yet provyded, & haveing a deep sence of the necessity of it & y^t it showld be done w^t speed [recommend] it to Ja. browne & Rich. Rae to use y^r utmost caire & diligence for effectwating the thing.

Again, in First Month, 1672, Friends are urged "to mynde a bwriall place y^t it may be provided timeously." In the following month, Friends "wpon severall considerations" recommended James Brown, Richard Rae, and others "fowrthwith to take a convenient rowme for a Meeting." Meanwhile, as the marriages of Friends at Edinburgh were celebrated at the house of James Brown, tanner, at the Westport, a very zealous man for the Society, it seems likely that the ordinary meetings for worship were held there also.

¹ Sewel's *History*, 1811, vol. ii., pp. 159, 181.

At length, in Third Month, 1675, the Committee was able to report favourably of its "dilligence as to y^e buriall place w^{ch} now is found out & bought for y^e service appoynted." The deed conveying the land is a very verbose, quaintly worded production, of which a small portion runs as follows :—

Be it Kent till all men be thir present that We, Maister James Nasmith and William Hog, wretters in Edinburgh, heretable proprietors of the Twa pairt acker of Land underwrine, baith with ane consent and assent. Forsūmeikl as David Falconer, merch^t, and burges of the said burgh of Ed., Hes instantlie advanced payed and delivered to us Al and haill the Somne of Eight hundred and thriescore merks, Scots money [ab^t £47 15s. 7d. sterling], And that as the full availlable pryce of that Tua pairt aiker of land underwrittine Qrof we grant the receipt and holds us weill contentit satisfied and payed, and for us our aires and successors exoners quitclames and simpliciter discharges the said David Falconare his aires exres and all others.

The land is thus described :—

All and Haill That Tua pairt aiker of land with the houses biggins and pertinents thereof Lyand in the vennell of St. Leonards upon the East syd of the trans thereoff Betuixt the aiker of land of umq^{ll} Robert Cairnes on the south That aiker of vmqhill John Moffat one the north The Lands of dishflat and the Common hie street on the East & west pairts.

It is to be held

in frie blench ferm for yearlie payment of ane pennie at the first of Whitsunday upon the ground of the saids lands in name of blench ferme if it beis requyred . . . y^e said infestments to be holdine frae us and them of the provest and bayllies of Ed^r our imediat laüll superiors of the samen.

The vendors then proceed to appoint certain (whose names are, however, left blank in the deed) :—

ilk ane of them conjunctlie and severallie our verie laüll undubtit irrevocable procurators factors messrs [?] and speciall eirand beirers . . . to compeir befor the provest or anie ane of the bayllies of the burgh of Ed, our Jmmediat Laüll superiors of the lands and oyres [others?] above wryttine. And ther with sic dow reverence and Eumilitie as becomes, be deliverie of earth and stone as use is to Resigne Surrender simpliciter up and over give Lyke as now as then and then as now We Have instantlie Resigned Surrendered Simpliciter up and over given All and Haill That tua pairt acker of Land, etc.

This was the property in the Pleasants³ which has ever since been used by Friends as a Burial Ground.

² *Umquhill*—former, late, deceased.

³ So called, it is said, from the Convent of S. Mary of *Placentia*, which formerly stood in that neighbourhood.

At Edinburgh Monthly Meeting, in Tenth Month, 1675, "The pepers concerning the buriall ground belonging to this meeting [were] given in by David Falconar with ane blanke disposition thereunto to be filled up when and to whom freinds shall see meet." The name of William Miller, gardener in the Abbey, was eventually inserted.⁴ The burial ground was thus satisfactorily provided, "ane door" built to it, and "ane spad, ane shovell, and ane Mattock" purchased at a cost of 55s. 4d. Scots (4s. 7½d. sterling), but a suitable Meeting House was much more difficult to find. Friends, indeed, seem to have resolved to build one for themselves, and mention is made in the minutes (Eighth Month, 1675) of "ye paper subscribed by freinds as there Volunter Contrabutione for ye building of a Meeting houss at Edin^r." There seems to have been a periodical collection for the same purpose until 1679, when the money in hand, amounting to £75 16s. sterling, was expended in purchasing a property in the Westport. Unfortunately the house was "not found at present convenient for that end" (*i.e.*, as a Meeting House), and the Friend through whom the purchase had been made was requested to "cownt to freinds for the añ rent of their money wntill freinds come to condiscend whither to make wse of the howse or not." This "annual rent" would appear to have been £50 scots, or, the minute naively adds, "as much more as they [the Committee in charge] can gett."

In 1681, died James Brown, the worthy tanner already mentioned, leaving, amongst several other bequests for the service of Truth, 2000 merks (rather more than £111 sterling) towards the purchase of the long-desired Meeting House. This money seems to have been secured on his dwelling-house in the Westport, so that Friends had now an interest in two properties in that region. Unfortunately, neither of them, however, was suited for a Meeting House, as appears from a minute of Eighth Month, 1681: "ffreinds being wnder a sense of the prejudice they Ly wnder for want of a convenient Meeting howse does Lay

⁴ The first recorded interment in the Pleasants was that of "Christian Lendores, wife to Hector Allen, Skipper in Leith, a trwely honnest woman serviceable in her generation [who] died at Leith in perfect wntie with the trwth and freinds the 8 day of the 8 month 1680, and was bwryed in the pleasance the 9th of the said month."

it on *all freinds in particwlar* to get a convenient Meeting howse."

From a minute of Eleventh Month, 1681, it seems pretty clear that Friends were meeting at the house of the late James Brown.

It being proposed to the Meeting by W^m Neill & And. fisher [tanners], y they were minded (if the meeting had nothing against it) to take a Lease of the howse qr now the meeting is, for themselves, being willing y^t freinds have the fowr rowmes for payment, wntill freinds can provide a more convenient meeting place, the qch freinds were satisfied with.

The minute proceeds :—

Freinds doe hereby jmpower Maurice trent & David falconar to speak & agree w^t ane honnest Mason to bwild a good Large meeting howse on the end of the bwriall ground towards the street, & Likwayes to consider how money may be raised from the 2 howses upon q^{ch} freinds money Lyes for the accomplishing of the same ; & to give Accot to every monthly meeting of their diligence & procedour in that matter.

How it came to pass that the "good Large meeting howse" was not erected on the property in the Pleasants must remain unexplained ; for, about this period, there is a vexatious hiatus in the Meeting minutes for five or six years. On their recommencement in 1689, we find Friends apparently in possession of a Meeting House of their own in the Westport, "the keies" thereof being entrusted to a Friend named John Hopkirk, who was "Likwayes to Look after the Rent of the other hous below, and the keeping of it tennent stead in time coming."⁵ Whether this was the same house occupied by James Brown, and, probably, afterwards by William Neill and Andrew Fisher, we cannot now tell, though it seems not improbable. The property consisted of two or three "flats" in a "turnpike stair," and about this time (the close of the seventeenth century) it was often the lot of Friends to have to finish their meetings on the "common stair," or to assemble in the open street in front, when driven out of their Meeting House by the rabble. These "outrageous adversaries" caused grievous suffering to

⁵ We find from the Yearly Meeting Epistle from Edinburgh to London in 1690 that no epistle had been sent the year before because the city was "under such a consternation through the frequent shooting of the Castle [which was held for King James against the Whigs], and our Meeting house where ffrends Records are [was] lyeing just under it in such danger." Several small shot had come through the window. (Devonshire House MSS.)

Friends, who in vain applied to the magistrates for protection. Indeed the authorities, with the Presbyterian preachers, were the open encouragers of the mob, and, in 1697, on Friends making more than usually urgent pleadings with them to restrain their excesses, the magistrates, by the hand of one of their number, Bailie Haliburton, seized the key of the house, and told Friends that the door would be built up and that they should never meet there again. For six months after this, Friends continued to assemble "at the futt of our own turne picke in the oppen stritts for a testimony against the unjust actings of the magistrets," the Meetings for Discipline being held in the Abbey at the house of Bartholomew Gibson or that of William Miller. After this, the flat below the Meeting House becoming vacant, Friends met there until 1698, when they recovered the key from the magistrates. The sufferings of Friends from the rabble continued several years after this, however, and in 1703, Friends were assailed in the law courts, an action being commenced by one "Barbrie Hodge" with the object of depriving Friends of their property.⁶ The suit dragged on for four years, but was at length decided in favour of Friends.

From its very frequent need of repairs, however, whether occasioned by the violence of the mob or by old age we cannot clearly gather, the property must have been a poor investment. Thus, in 1706, a Committee was appointed by the Yearly Meeting to "take some knowing workeman which they are to bespeak this night, and take along with them the morrow at six aclock in the morning, and take inspection of the rooffe of the house and according as they conclude either to mend the same or if it be necessary to take of the whol rooff." The "knowing workeman" must have performed his part badly, for in 1714 complaint was made to the Yearly Meeting "y^t y^e Roof belonging to the Meeting House is like to fall"; consequently William Miller was

ordered to caus give it the necessary Reparations and to pay it out of y^e ffrst and Readiest money he Receives in, it is y^e opinion of this meeting y^t the window in y^e Room wher y^e men's meeting sitts wanteth to have

⁶ See THE JOURNAL, ii., pp. 107-109, 125, 126.

ane Lettice to be made and covered with parchment to be put up when ffriends sitts there, and that the plaistering of ye walls be helped and whitned, also the two Windows within ye door and without it be also Firlaced, to hinder y^e stones for Coming upon friends when y^e wyld Boys do Trou y^m.

In the following spring William Miller presented his account for these repairs, "both of mason work, sclating, dales, & trees, and Carpenter Work, and plaistering," amounting to the sum of £1,079 5s. 2d. Scots, "In English money 89lb. 18s. 9½d." In spite of this large outlay, the treasurer had to report in 1719 that Friends "had Lett non of y^e Rooms above y^e Meeting House, upon acc^t y^e Loft of 3d story not being in Repair, so it is y^e minde of Friends y^t y^e said Loft be taken upp & Repaired."

Notwithstanding the many complaints of its unsatisfactory state, it continued to be used by Friends until 1729, when a new Meeting House was built in Peebles Wynd, one of the narrow lanes branching off from the Cowgate, not far from where Blair Street now stands. It cost £210 6s. 10d. sterling, the money "for the promotion of so good and laudable a work" being raised partly by subscription, partly by the sale of the old Meeting House, which was purchased by William Miller for £85.⁷ Thomas Story, who attended Edinburgh Yearly Meeting in 1730, mentions the new building with satisfaction as having accommodation for about six hundred, and as being filled on each meeting day "not with a rude Rabble as formerly," but with "a sober, reputable-like people," many also being without in the yard.⁸

Thirty years later we have a very different picture presented to us. The old zeal of Friends for the Truth and their bravings of cruel mockings, stonings, and imprisonments had quite died out, and the few left in Edinburgh bearing the name of Quaker assembled in their Meeting House or in the "Chapel of Ease" at Meadowflats, with the doors "barred and Locked in the time of worship" against all except themselves, and with a soldier paid for keeping guard at the door!

⁷ In the *Edinburgh Courant* newspaper for September, 1729 [?] (quoted in Cassell's *Old and New Edinburgh*), there is a notice of the new Meeting House: "Though it was roofed there is as yet no window in it; but some merrily observe these people have light within."

⁸ *Journal*, pp. 667, 668.

Very little remains to be chronicled regarding the old Meeting House—except its demolition. About the year 1790, the heavy hand of the city improver was laid upon it and the adjacent houses, the very Wynd itself, being swept away to make room for the alterations which resulted in the present South Bridge of Edinburgh. Friends were allowed £375 as compensation. And now, at length, something of the old idea was carried out, and “a good Large Meeting Howse” erected on the unused portion of the old Burial Ground in the Pleasants. In Eighth Month, 1790, workmen were engaged, and very shortly the Monthly Meeting was informed by the committee of management that the contract had been signed for the erection of the new Meeting House for the sum of £475. The contract, dated 9th November, 1790, was made between George Miller, Alexander Cruickshank and John Witchell,⁸ “merchants in Edinburgh . . . on account of the Society of people commonly called Quakers in and about Edinburgh of the one part, and Alexander Paterson, mason, and Thomas Dott, wright, both builders in Edinburgh, of the other part.” The mason work and roof were finished by the 27th of November, and £200 paid on account. The building was to be entirely completed by the 20th April, 1791, in time for the recently established “General Meeting.”

And so, ever since, the house has remained in use, a square-built, grave, substantial-looking building of stone, as beseems a Friends’ Meeting House.

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Southey’s Appreciation of Sewel’s “History.”

Sewel’s *History of the Quakers* is an honourable exception to the generality of Ecclesiastical Histories which of all other books are most remarkable for falshood. Never was any book written with more perfect veracity, & the consequence is that with the best disposition to believe that miracles were vouchsafed in favour of his brethren he relates but very few, & of those few the only one which may not obtain belief from the coolest judgment, is fetched from a distance, & the manner in which he relates it is sufficient to persuade me of his veracity. SOUTHEY.

⁸ John Witchell was the first husband of Mary Wright, a Friend of some note last century, who died at Leeds in 1859, aged 103.