

Margaret Meakins and the Plague of London

AMONGST the family MSS. of George Brightwen, of Trimley, near Ipswich, is the following memorandum by his late aunt, Mary Sims Brightwen, of Ipswich, who died in 1882, aged seventy-seven:

“Concerning the enclosed Nutmeg-grater, which came into her possession through her mother, Mary [Isaac] Brightwen, of Coggeshall, Essex, as far back as I can remember, this silver nutmeg-grater was kept in constant use and kept with the spoons and ladles in our sideboard drawer; white-wine negus being at that time of day in much more frequent use than now (happily).

“I have often heard my mother say that it belonged to one of her great-aunts,¹ named Margaret Meekings, who was aunt² to her father, John Sims [of Norwich, etc.], and aunt [great-grandmother] to his sister, Mary Smith,³ who at the decease of John Sims’s wife,⁴ took his eldest daughter, then twelve years of age, to live with her, and through whom my mother received this relic.

“She told us that Margaret Meekins was a good and pious woman, and lived in London during the time of the Plague, when everybody who was of ability fled from the city into the country.

“This Margaret Meekins thought to be wrong; ‘For,’ said she, ‘if all the healthy leave, what will become of the sick and dying?’ So she went in and out amongst them and had large quantities of gruel and messes made for them, and, doing all the good she could, took not the disease.

“Is it too much to suppose that she used this very nutmeg-grater when seasoning the gruel she so liberally distributed?

“In parting with a lot of old silver my mother included the original silver grater, as it was worn smooth, and no

¹ In reality, her great-great-grandmother.

² Great-grandmother.

³ Second wife of Thomas Smith, of Lombard Street, banker.

⁴ Ann Thresher.

longer answered its purpose, and had a tin one made in its place ; I remember her doing so well, but she afterwards regretted it, as it had Margaret Meekins's initials upon it, as also the date showing it to have been hers at the time of the Great Plague of London, and consequently before the Great Fire, and the Monument erected to its memory."

Thus far M. S. Brightwen, but it is not clear exactly as to whether the old nutmeg-grater was recovered eventually or no.

Margaret Meakins was a leading London Friend, was born circa 1622, and died of age in Cripplegate, 17 June, 1692, aged seventy. Her husband, John Meakins, born also circa 1622, was a dyer at Cripplegate, and died there 23 September, 1694, aged seventy-two. They had a family of one son, John, who died in 1665, aged four, and three daughters, *viz.*, Mary, who married in 1678, James Strutt, of Wapping ; Martha, who married in 1678, William Dry ; and Elizabeth, who married in 1680, Benjamin Ollive. From the last marriage descend the well-known Quaker families of Sims, Talwin, Corder, Hagen, Brightwen, Binyon, Perry, Poulter, Green, and others.

The will of John Meakins, dated 1694, names his son-in-law, Edward Cooper, and grandson, John Cooper, whom he makes executors. His son-in-law, Benjamin Ollive, continued his dye-works ; and the famous calico-printing and dyeing works at Bromley Hall, Middlesex, carried on by the Ollives, Talwins and Fosters, were the outcome of John Meakins's business.

Margaret Meakins, who was a member of the Six Weeks Meeting in 1671, is one of the twenty signatories to *A Tender and Christian Testimony to Young People*, etc., a quarto pamphlet of eight pages, dated 1685 : "From our Womens Meeting at the Bull and Mouth." Amongst other signatories are Ann Whitehead, Lucretia Cook, Mariabella Farmborough, Ruth Crouch, etc.

This was also printed the same year as a broadside of 1½ pages.⁵

Margaret Meakins, together with many other Friends, also wrote a testimony (of two pages) concerning Ann Whitehead (wife of George Whitehead) in 1686.

⁵ Both editions are in D. [ED.]

This narrative relating to the Plague is interesting. It was notorious that the Anglican clergy generally fled from London with the rest, while many of the long-suffering ejected ministers remained in town to assist the stricken and distracted people with their ministrations. Other instances are recorded of those who survived the Plague, in spite of their care of the sick and dying, trusting in God for their deliverance, as was the case, no doubt, with Margaret Meakins.

As a striking contrast to the action of the London clergy, is that of the rector of Eyam, in Derbyshire, the Rev. William Mompesson, who to his eternal honour, together with the ejected rector, Thomas Stanley, laboured in that plague-stricken village of 1666, under the most tragic circumstances one can imagine. The narrative of their heroic labours is one of the most interesting upon record, and we may rest assured will never be forgotten.

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Quaker Sermons in the Pumproom at Bath

“REMARKABLE OCCURRENCE.—Yesterday, between two and three o’clock in the afternoon, when the Pump-room was full of fashionables, a Mr. Fox, attended by several other Quakers, addressed the company for some time; after which Mrs. PRISCILLA GURNEY, a Quakeress, commenced an oration, but was prevailed upon by some Gentlemen to desist.”—*Bath Chronicle*, 17.—¹

Dr. R. Hingston Fox, of London, thinks that “Mr. Fox” may have been Francis Fox of Falmouth. “He was a valued Minister and had a strong voice and solemn manner. He attended London Y.M. in 1794 and might have taken Bath *en route*. He died, young, next year of fever. He is the only Fox, Minister, that I know of in this period (a man).” Priscilla Hannah Gurney (1757-1828) was daughter of Joseph and Christiana (Barclay) Gurney. “She was of the old school; her costume partook of this, and her long retention of the black hood gave much character to her appearance.” (Hare, *Gurneys of Earlham*, i. 104.) She “was small in person, beautiful in countenance, elegant in manner, delicate in health and almost fastidiously refined in habit” (*ibid.* p. 303). P. H. Gurney visited Bath frequently.

¹ Another copy of this newscutting in D. is dated, in writing, 1817. If this date was correct, “Mr. Fox” was *not* Francis Fox.