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Thomas Bennet, Schoolmaster, of Pickwick, Wilts

THE construction of a life-history from scattered and often slender data is an interesting if somewhat exacting task.

We have attempted such a task, however, having gathered and strung together what information is available relative to a Wiltshire educationist of some note in his day, and a ministering Friend of some experience in religious work.

Abiah Darby, in her Diary, under the date 1762, writing of her visit to Wiltshire, gives us the first peep into Thomas Bennet's early history. She says, "I think he said he came from Barbadoes & had the grounds of his convincement at Sankey School."¹ A minute of Wiltshire Q.M. (see later) states that Bennet's father died in Jamaica, c. 1722, so we may be safe in associating his earliest days with the West Indies, whence he was sent to England for education.

The school at Sankey belonging to Penketh P.M., presided over by Gilbert Thompson (1658-1719), and by his son of the same name (1700-1768), was noted in its day, and here numerous prominent Friends received their education, as *e.g.*, Edmund Peckover (d. 1767), and Dr. J. C. Lettsom (d. 1815). Thomas Bennet was probably there under the elder Gilbert.

¹ See pp. 79-92, where extracts from this Diary are printed.

Following his school-days in the North, Thomas was received in some capacity into the household of Caleb Dickinson, of Monks, near Corsham, Wilts. This is stated in the Q.M. Minute. Monks House is situated one-and-a-half miles south of Corsham and its inhabitants were Friends of prominence. Caleb and Sarah Dickinson had several young children at this time, and Bennet may have been their tutor-companion. In 1755, other members of this family, Vickris and Elizabeth Dickinson, were living at Pickwick Lodge.

Meanwhile Wiltshire Friends were under much exercise respecting a school for their children. The opening of a school at Corsham was proposed in 1692, but three years later the following is recorded on the Q.M. Minute :—

As to promoting a schoole in this county . . . ffriends of Melksham proposeth the boarding of children at 7 pound p annum (and no place offering so commodious as y^t) its agreed that a School be there set up for ffriends Children & to bee made worth 30 pound to the Master for one year.

Enquiries, to be made “at London or elsewhere,” resulted in 1696 in the appointment of “John Jeffry,² of Hampton psh in Gloucestershire.” In 1705, Jeffry was succeeded by John Padley, “a young man from the north,” but how long the school was continued, we know not. Apparently it was given up, for in 1721, we read in the Q.M. book :—

1 11 mo. 1721. Charlcoat & Chippenham Monthly Meetings proposed a School Master for y^e County (viz^t) Thomas Bennet who have lived with Caleb Dickinsons for some time, this Meeting approve of it & advises him to settle at Devizes or near thereabouts.

2 2 mo. 1722. Thomas Bennet gave acco^t to y^e Meeting y^t he hath concluded to begin a School for friends at Melksham next week, & y^e Meeting desires y^e friends of y^e County to encourage him all y^t they can & send as many Children to him as possible.

2 5 mo. 1722. This Meeting was acquainted y^t Tho Bennet did begin a School at Melksham according to y^e 9th minute of last meeting, but his ffather dying lately in Jamaica & making him his executor & finding y^t his affairs there cannot be settled without his presence, he is now gon for Bristol to take Ship accordingly with design to return to Melksham againe as soon as possible.

² The name Jefferys is of frequent appearance in Wiltshire records.

It is not yet apparent in what year Thomas Bennet opened school at Pickwick; perhaps he did not settle at Melksham again on his return from Jamaica. His marriage with Mary — may have taken place after his settlement in the northern parts of the county. The first definite date connecting him with Corsham Meeting is 7 mo. 1725 :—

Joseph Hull inform'd y^e [Quarterly] Meeting that Tho: Bennet is now threatned with a prosecution by Sam^l Twiford for teaching a Gramar School, this Meeting adviseth him to apply to one or two of y^e country Correspondents in order for them to write to y^e Meeting for Sufferings for their advice & assistance when he shall be persecuted.

But it turned out that the intended prosecution was for some reason withdrawn.

In 10 mo. 1725, is recorded the birth to Thomas and Mary Bennet, of Pickwick, of a son, named John—perhaps their only child. The Bennet homestead at Pickwick became a centre of Quaker influence in the district. In 5 mo. 1726, Chippenham M.M. was held at this house, and later the Q.M.; Bennet also frequently represented his Meeting in other parts of the county. From 1726, the minutes of his M.M. were written fair in his beautiful handwriting, and also the minutes of the Q.M., and several Books of Sufferings were transcribed by him. In 1729, Chippenham M.M. records :—

The acct of holding the Monthly and particular Meetings was recomended from that Meeting to this Meeting and Thomas Bennett is desired to transcribe the Same into our Book and a copy thereof to each particular Meeting: And this Meeting taking into Consideration the Care & Charges of Thomas Bennett in finding paper &c for this Meeting have therefore voluntarily collected one Shilling each Meeting Chippenham excepted which we hope will be answered in our next and We desire the like Collection may be made annually. [There were five Meetings.]

In 1727 he was appointed, with other Friends,

To meet together at Devizes and to collect all the Yearly Meeting Epistles and all the written Minutes sent from the Yearly Meeting and make a book thereof together with an Index thereunto, to be always bro^t to this Meeting for ready & easy recourse to the mind of the Yearly Meeting on any point that may come before this Meeting.

In 7 mo. 1727, he attended as a representative the Circular Y.M. for the Seven Western Counties, held at

Marlborough, and in the following year he was at Y.M. in London.

The settlement of an active Friend in the hamlet of Pickwick soon aroused interest in the neighbourhood, and in 7 mo. 1733

Thomas Bennett sent a proposal of holding an Evening Meeting according to discretion or as occasion serves on first days at his house and withal desired the concurrence Consent & approbation of this Meeting which is readily approved of by this Meeting hoping it may be of service.

Next year Corsham reports that "there seems a Great openness amongst our Neighbours who frequently attend the evening meetings held at times at Pickwick." Presumably Thomas took his scholars to meeting at Corsham on First-day mornings, a distance of about a mile.

The School also was reported in 1734 as "a very good Boarding School for Friends' children." There was trouble, however, with the teaching staff. In 1734 the M.M. records that Thomas Bennet's apprentice, William Leigh, "hath clandestinely married Sarah daüter of Anthony Lawrence, of Brinkworth, by a Priest," and only after William had twice expressed contrition was the "satisfaction" of the M.M. expressed. A few months later, Jonas Binns, perhaps another assistant teacher, removed from the district, but Friends could not give him a clear certificate as to conduct :—

For the most part he walked orderly but can't say that it was so wholly & altogether the indiscretion of youth prevailing in some degree to his disadvantage & our sorrow, which he has acknowledged in a Letter sent to his former Master Thomas Bennett.

The exigencies of scholastic life did not prevent our Friend from travelling in the service of Truth, for about this time, 1736,

Thos. Bennett requested of this Meeting a few lines by way of Certificate in his Journeys to and from London which this Meeting consents to and is as follows (viz^t)

to friends of the Morning Meeting in London or elsewhere.

Dear friends,

Our well beloved friend Thomas Bennett Member of this Meeting having acquainted us with his Intention of Attending the Ensuing Yearly Meeting in London, and desiring a Certificate from this Meeting

We think proper to signifie on his behalf that he is in good Unity with us both as a Member and Minister and his Gift and Labour of Love well received amongst us surely beleiving his Life and Conversation answerable to his Doctrine and as such we recomēd him to you, desiring his Growth and prosperity in the blessed Truth in the salutation of which we remain Your friends & Brethren—

Sign'd in & on behalf of
our s^d Meeting.

The receipt of this certificate was entered on the books of the Morning Meeting in London, and the Friend concerned thus liberated for religious service as an approved Minister.

Though residing somewhat aside from the main courses of life and activity, Thomas Bennet was in written communication with Friends more centrally situated. The following letter to Joshua Toft (c. 1689-1769) is doubtless only a specimen of many such from his pen:—³

Pickwick the 22nd 10/mo., 1732.

Dear and Worthy Friend!

Thy kind favour of 6th Jnst: came to hand the 17th which as it was unexpected & not look'd for, Considering the great difference, and inequality there is between us, in respect to our Stations in the Church, both as Members and Ministers, so is it the more acceptable: and calls for my particular acknowledgments, in that thy Condescension reaches to one of the least and meanest of the thousands of Israel; and is no less than the Effect of a measure of that divine Love that the Father of mercies has plentifully shed abroad in thy heart, in order to invite and encourage others to a Constant perseverance, in those things that are holy, just and pure and y^t make for their peace here; and eternal Solace hereafter if truly minded: And tho' the Gift & measure of Grace bestowed on some may be but small, and as it were only one Talent, yet faithfulness and obedience to the measure rec'd, will certainly entitle such Souls to that welcome Sentence at last of well done, good and ffaithfull Servants, you have been ffaithful over a few things you shall be rulers over many things: Enter you into the joy of your Lord; And it is by true obedience, as J take it, that many of our Worthy Friends, some being entered into their rest, and others still remaining among us, have arisen from small beginnings, to be fixed Starrs in the firmament of Glory and as Way-marks to poor Travellers, in their Spritual progress, thro' this Vale of Tears, Sorrows, afflictions and excercises, to the heavenly Canaan and Land of rest; and as tender ffathers and Jnstrumentms in the hand of God, to encourage, Strengthen and Lend an hand of help to the distressed & bowed down ones, and to such as go mourning on their way, by Example first & then by precepts, in Exhortations and Doctrine, in order that such may be builded up in the most holy faith: Such helps are very desir-

³ From the original in D. (Crosfield MSS.)

able, and what J have been, in my measure, favoured with at Times, when in a low and suffering State, and have been as blood to my Veins, marrow to my bones and afforded Life to my Languishing Soul. But on the Contrary, where disobedience creeps in, thro' giving way to Grandeur & Ambition, and taking the Jewels of the Lord and decking self therewith, then it is that such are Stumbling blocks in the way of Sober Enquirers, and as way-marks that have lost their Inscriptions, and unlikely to guide Travellers aright: This has been the case with some among us to the great grief of the honest hearted. And may all such, who are now as Silver Trumpets in the hand of the great Trumpeter, who have been and are still, at times, favoured with an Extraordinary measure of the divine Incomes of Life to the administring Suitably to the States of those present, where-ever their Lotts are cast, viz^t Bread to whom Bread is due, and the rod to whom the rod is due, be truly careful, and humbly watchful to defeat the Enemy of their Souls peace, thro' the divine Assistance in all his Attacks Assaults and Allurements, of what kind soever they may be, and keep in mind the old proverb: *Fælix quem faciunt aliena pericula cautum*⁴ is what J am in earnest for: J, who am as a Mite in the Treasury, am, at times, concerned in Secret Supplications and Breathings to the Lord of the harvest, that he would, not only send forth and Qualifie more Labourers in his Gospel work and Service, but also preserve, protect and uphold those his faithful ministers, whom he has already qualified, and sent forth and keep 'em humble and low in their own Esteem whatever Encomiums others may be pleased to give them: Surely the more humble the Creature is, the more he sees himself as he really is (viz^t) weak and frail, and the more he sees his own Weakness and frailty the more ardent will his application be to the Fountain from whence Strength comes: For (as thou truly observes that 'We have great Cause to be humbly thankfull that in these Easie, yet dangerous Times, a remnant can set to his Seal that Truth changes not') there's the same power, Virtue, and Efficacy in Truth as ever there was; And may the Fountain of all Goodness justice & Mercy still Continue his Care and oversight, to his Children and people and favour them with the Upper & Nether Springs of his Love to the Consolating and refreshing them together whilst here, and receive us all into the full fruition of Bliss and Glory hereafter, is what J sincerely desire.

Dear Joshua! J thought not when J took pen in hand, to expose myself in such a manner, and so largely; but now recollecting to whom J am writing, must crave thy favourable Excuse for so doing not doubting, but thou will Condescend to overlook my Simplicity herein as well as thou hast Complied to visit me wth a few lines: And J do entreat thee that when thy Leisure and freedom shall permit, to visit me again wth thy hand writing, having always a desire of such Epistolary Visits from my near and dear friends, when personal ones cann't be Conveniently performed. (Tho' am in hopes of seeing thee soon with thy Nephew,⁵

⁴ "Happy are they who can learn prudence from the danger of others"—a footnote in a modern hand.

⁵ This was, doubtless, Allan Toft, son of Samuel and Lettice (Key) Toft. He was born in 1724 and died in 1746.

Esteemed Friends
Tho Baskerville & John Davis

Pickwick the 3. 9th Decr 1739

Your kind favour of 23. Ult. in answer to mine preceding is thankfully acknowledged: would have answered the same the succeeding post but answerable to your direction and Advice I applied to a Neighbouring Gentleman, who I thought had sufficient Influence on the Parson, and has so far prevailed on him as that he intends to drop the Exchequer process and take his demand by Justice warrant, and not only proceed in this easier Method for his present demand but likewise intends for the future to make use of the same Method on acc^t of Tythes, and further proposes also for Summons the three others, mentioned in my former Letter as threatened with a Subpoena in the Exchequer, by a Justice warrant, so that I hope the Excessive Charges of that Court will be happily avoided: at least so long as the parson continues his mild and pacifick disposition.

He is a Vicar, his demand is 27^{rs} 5^d for small Tythes and for Ten years standing to Lady day last past: it seems he had applied to Justice for a warrant but because he would not swear to the value, it was denyed him which occasioned his Recourse to the Exchequer Court: the Charges either of you have been at on this Occasion shall be allowed you when and where you shall order. Interim am with mine and Wifes kindest respect in which I am
joins

Your assured & obliged Friend
Bennette

whom thou intended to put to School here) and shall never bethink the Charge of postage &c. let thine come as often as thou art disposed. J am sorry to hear of thy Brother's⁶ Death, but hope 'tis his Gain and inasmuch as Mortality cries aloud in many places, happy and blessed are all those who are living Witnesses (*morte appropinquante*) that the Sting of Death is taken away; these can with assurance, having their Garments washed white in the blood of the Lamb, enter into the heavenly Jerusalem, with songs of Joy and Triumph, where they Live to praise & magnifie his worthy Name, that has thus redeemed them: and that Lives for ever & Ever.

J conclude in dear Love and much Affection

Thy real and unfeigned Friend

T. BENNETT.

Benja^a Kidd⁷ has been lately thro' our County, watering what thou did plant: J wish we may be worthy of such Visits—

J venture to add: All thy known friends in this County are dearly remembred to thee.

Please in thy next to give me thy meaning to this Sentence, in thine before me, because J do not rightly understand it: viz^t

'So that Self comes to be made of no reputation, nor do we Spoil the work by Sleighting our Gift because we think it is but small and yet by ffaithfulness amounts to a Considerable degree of Inward Solace.' (Sleighting our Gift) is what J would have unfolded: The Gift in my opinion, tho' never so small ought not to be Slighted but embraced & loved for the Givers Sake.

Note after J had Sealed the Letter was willing to break it open again myself, please to remember me kindly to my friend & Quondam Schoolfellow Sam. Lucas.

[Addressed]

To Joshua Toft

att his Seat att Leek

Staffordshire.

The year 1740 was still young when small-pox broke out in the School, and not long before there had been difficulty respecting tithe (see reproduction of letter to Friends in London⁸), but these troubles were doubtless mitigated by the help of a valuable assistant, John Gough⁹

⁶ Samuel Toft died in 8 mo. 1732, aged thirty-six. His brother Joshua appears to have become the guardian of his nephew, Allan.

⁷ For B. Kidd (d. 1751), see THE JOURNAL, v. x.

⁸ Photographed from the original in D.

⁹ John Gough (1721-1791) was the son of John and Mary Gough, of Kendal. At about the age of fourteen he entered Pickwick School as Assistant. He was upwards of twenty years a schoolmaster in Dublin, and became in 1774 head of the boarding school at Lisburn, where he died. His *magnum opus* in literature was his *History of the People called Quakers*, in four vols., 1789-90. He also wrote treatises on arithmetic, grammar, etc.

by name, who had been some four or five years in Bennet's employ. When, somewhat later in 1740, Gough applied for a certificate of removal, the Friends of his M.M. express great esteem for him in the following words:—

John Gough the bearer hereof, having resided near four years within the Verge of our Meeting, with our Friend Thomas Bennett Schoolmaster, as an Assistant to him in his School, and purposing to remove into Ireland to settle there if a proper place offers . . . We think proper hereby to certifie you, that during his service with the s^d Thomas Bennett . . . his Behaviour & conduct . . . have been entirely consistent . . . and that he discharged himself faithfully in his late Master's service both with honour & reputation. . .

Gough's place was taken by Anthony Hatsell, of Kendal.

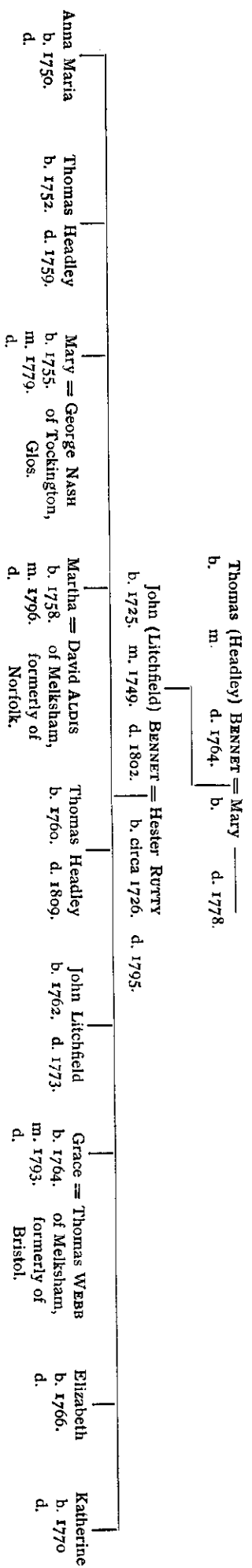
We know little of the Friends who passed through Pickwick School—one scholar at least became a noted man, Bristol's great philanthropist, Richard Reynolds (1735-1816). In a memorandum respecting him, printed in *Reynolds-Rathbone Diaries and Letters*, 1905, p. 171, we read as follows:—

1741 to 1750, Richard Reynolds was taken as a Boarder to the School of Thos. Bennet at Pickwick in the County of Wilts, the 11th of 2d Month, 1741, being 5 years, 5 months, and 10 days old, and continued there till the 7th Month, 1750.

Poor little fellow! we hope his school-fellows were kind to him.

During the next year or two, religious visits were paid "westwards," and also in Berkshire and Hampshire, and on the 11th of 4 mo. 1749, an interesting event occurred—the marriage of John, son of Thomas Bennet, with Hester, daughter of Samuel Ruty, of Melksham. The Ruty family was prominent in Wiltshire Quakerism. John Ruty (1698-1775), the noted doctor and writer, was a member of this family, who removed to Dublin in 1724. John Bennet must by this time have become a valuable assistant to his father, and probably liberated him for the religious work he engaged in freely at this period of his life. The School still flourished. A minute of the Q.M. of 4 mo. 1761, runs:—

As to the Eighth of last the following answer is directed to be delivered by our deputies to the Yearly Meeting in London, (viz^t) With respect to Encouraging Schoolmasters, this meeting taking into



The nomenclature of the Bennet family is interesting in that it contains quite early instances of two "given names," although neither father nor son appears to have made use of the Headley in one case, and the Litchfield in the other.

consideration the proposal reports that this County has been, for many years, and is still supplied with a Schoolmaster, who was accepted, in that capacity by the approbation of the Qua. Meeting, and who is willing still, to serve the County and Society in that Station, in Case provision could be made for the Education of poor friends childⁿ.

And now the end draws nigh, but of the closing scenes of Thomas Bennet's life we have no account. He was present at a M.M. on the 19th of 3 mo. 1764, and this is the last notice of his attendance. His demise took place on the 10th of 7 mo. 1764, and his burial at Pickwick on the 13th. Three days later the M.M. decided to hold its next sessions at the house of *Mary* Bennet at Pickwick.

Fortunately the son was prepared to take the father's place. At a M.M. held at John Bennet's, 10th of 9 mo. 1764 :—

John Bennet also acquainted this Meeting that he intends succeeding his late Father Thomas Bennet in Teaching the school at Pickwick, which our Deputies are likewise desired to lay before the next Q.M. for their approbation.

This met with the approbation of the Q.M. John Bennet was also installed in his father's place as "writer" of M.M. and Q.M. minutes, but the handwriting of father and son was so similar, it is difficult to state when the break was made. Between them they wrote the Q.M. minutes from 11 mo. 1726, to 9 mo. 1774, and M.M. minutes from 8 mo. 1726, to 7 mo. 1775.

There is no information at hand as to the future of the Pickwick Grammar School. It may be that John Bennet resigned his position, or the School may have been given up—in the record of the death of his son John, in 1773, he (the father) is termed "weaver," and he is styled "yeoman" at his own death in 1802.

In 1800, Pickwick appears in a list of Wiltshire Meetings, the hours of the gathering being First-day at 11 and Fifth-day at 11. In 1815, the Meeting was held monthly in summer, and later in the year closed entirely.

Here we must leave the family, adding only a genealogical table, which will show the connection of the family with Wilts Quakerism down to the beginning of the nineteenth century, the last entry in the Registers being the death of Thomas Bennet, yeoman, of Pickwick, in 1804, aged forty-nine.