

Mercy Ransom, née Bell [1728-1811], of London, Croydon, and Hitchin

MERCY RANSOM was the tenth child and fifth daughter of Benjamin Bell, a Quaker druggist, of Leadenhall Street, London (and by company, a Citizen and Glover), and of Mercy Wragg, his wife, and was born there 15th June, 1728. In her early years she had the privilege of the ministrations of that eminent Quaker Minister, Samuel Fothergill, when she was resident both in London and at Croydon, where her grandparents, William and Mary (Owen) Wragg, her parents and three of her brothers and a married sister, Sarah Crafton, resided, and where her father was buried in 1752, and her mother in 1774.

In our possession is a manuscript, formerly Mercy Ransom's, inscribed "Mercy Bell's Commonplace Book, July the 24th, 1745." In this book the young Diarist has neatly entered her spiritual experiences, accounts of ministering Friends, Scripture texts, sundry events, copies of Quaker letters and anecdotes, etc., etc., up to the year 1757.

Amongst other entries are the following:—"Went to Tottenham, June 8th, 1738 [presumably to school]; Came away December 23, 1743." Then follows a long entry in cypher, in figures, which is easily decipherable!

Other entries include a copy of a religious letter from William Penn "To a young Person of his acquaintance," dated "Navy Office, 10th of ye 5th Month, 1668," also a "Paper of James Naylor's written by way of Recantation after his Fall and Sufferings."

A long letter dated "London, 18th of the Seventh month, 1697," from Thomas Story to his father, on the latter's strong objection to his son going to Pennsylvania.

“ 28-4th month, 1749, a Meeting was appointed for Mary Paisley [Peisley, later Neale], and Mary Weston, etc. M. P. said ‘ Bad Books [are] as effectual poison to the mind as ars[e]nick to the Body.’ ”

“ 16-5th month, 1749, Henton Brown, Thomas Olave [Ollive], and Elizabeth Talwin was at Croydon Meeting.”

Another entry says, “ I remember when we went to pay our first visit to Cousin J[eremiah] O[wen]’s wife, 1749, notwithstanding the gaiety and grandeur which appear’d in her dress and Equipage, with which our eyes could not but be somewhat taken up, a certain passage of Scripture seem’d to live in my mind in a particular manner to wit what David says ‘ one Hour in the presence of God is better than a thousand any where else.’ ”

Other entries refer to the ministrations of Abigail Watson, Ann Barclay, William Pitts, Thomas Dann, John Hayward, Elizabeth Bundock, Sarah Artis, Lydia Lancaster, Benjamin Kidd, Jane Hoskins, S. Hunt, Elizabeth Sim[p]kins, Mary Abbott, Daniel Stanton of Pennsylvania, Samuel Sanns [? Sands] of Lancashire, Daniel Bell, John Hunt, Kitty Payton, Rachel Trafford, Nicholas Davis, Thomas Whitehead, Sophia Hume, John Townsend, Susanna Morris, Sarah [Sims] Beck, M. Keine, Thomas Constable, Rachel Penfold, Isaac Sharpless, etc., mostly at Croydon Meeting, Gracechurch Street, etc.

“ In this year [1749-50] also I was at ye Burial of our Friend Jonathan Dickenson, at which we had a very large meeting; he was a man generally well-beloved by his Friends and Neighbours.”

“ 30-4-1751 Joseph Rule [“ The Quaker in White ”] was at Croydon Meeting, and the Day before he preach’d at the Market House.” “ 11-6-1751, Joseph Rule at Croydon Meeting.”

“ 18-5 month, 1753, Susanna Morris visited us accompanied by S[arah] Beck and M. Picket. Susanna spoke chiefly by way of Exhortation & seem’d to think there was among us who had received the Truth in the Love of it and were in a good degree Conformable to its Dictates. She also much perswaded my Brothers [William, Benjamin and Joseph Bell] to take heed and beware of Deism.”

The Diarist frequently speaks of Samuel Fothergill's sermons, commencing 17-10-1749, principally at Gracechurch Street, also at Westminster, Devonshire House, Horslydown, Peel, Park, Wapping, etc., and notes a parting meeting at Gracechurch Street, 28-5-1752. Under date "12-9-1756 Samuel Fothergill was at Gracechurch St. Meeting Morning and Afternoon (the first time I saw him after his return from America) in the morning his text was 'Watchman what of y^e night' . . . he stood about an Hour & half, & concluded the meeting in prayer. In the Afternoon (thou shalt not make unto thy self any graven Image), . . . stood, I think rather better than an Hour & half & concluded the Meeting in Prayer."

"In y^e 11th Mo 1757 Samuel Fothergill came to visit this City of London; I many times heard him greatly to my Satisfaction, Instruction, Edification, & Comfort; I recollect some of the Texts he preached from viz^t at Joseph Besse's Burial, Ratcliffe (tho' not a Scripture Text, yet an undoubted Truth), 'It is a Solemn Thing to Live & an Awful Thing to Dye.'"

The Diarist then recites other occasions and texts. "4th Day Evening, young Folks Meeting, Devonshire House, 1 Tim. 4 Chap. 8 ver." . . . "This same day [sixth day], S[amuel] F[othergill] call'd at our house to bid us farewell, (indeed I thought it a solemn parting). On my saying 'I hope we shall profitably remember thy visit,' he spoke to this Effect, 'I earnestly wish the living among you may encrease in strength & be able to Bury the Dead. I have desir'd to be kept in the right line, & endeavour'd to move in it according to the best of my understanding. I have nothing to boast of but an easy calm or *quiet* [he] seem'd to intimate he had finish'd his Commission, or Business & could depart in Peace), there is many or Divers particulars of this City my spirit is united to in an indissolvable Bond; you both among divers others will often recurr to my Remembrance.' It was a Visit (tho' short, yet satisfactory) I think I shall not soon forget it. 30th 12 Mo. 1757."

Amongst miscellaneous entries, Mercy Bell says, under date "8-12 month, 1749-50, there was felt a shock of an earthquake in the City of London and Suburbs,

likewise at Westminster, I felt it at our house in Leadenhall Street in the Dining Room sitting in a window, it seem'd to me as if the House gave way like one going to fall. 8th 1st month following about half an hour after 5 a Clock in y^e morning we felt another shock which I believe is generally allow'd to be considerably greater than the former, it seem'd so to me; many People was waked out of their Sleep; some say there was a small Shock between 1 & 2 in the morning, I heard a person say so that felt it; neither is these all the warnings that Infinite Wisdom has seen meet to send us, one of which I should think might be sufficient to convince every mortal not only that there is an Almighty Being, but that he can shake us poor worms into Atoms in a moment. I think that of the Locusts which hath appear'd in and about London for the 2 last Summers is remarkable & appears to me as if Infinite Loving Kindness is yet pleas'd to spare us a little longer to see if shaking the Rod will lead this long-favour'd nation to Repentance, which my soul truly desires."

Mercy Bell, then aged about thirty, married firstly, 17 May, 1757, at Devonshire House, as his second wife, Stamper Bland, of Lombard Street, Citizen and Banker, son of John and the late Elizabeth Bland of the same. At this wedding was a large gathering of relatives of the names of Chamberlin, Crafton, Vaux, Owen, Bell, Bland, Hagen, Chorley, Wragg, Stamper, etc.; and amongst other witnesses were Edmund Peckover, Daniel Bell, Joseph Green, Grizell Hoare, etc., etc.

Stamper Bland did not long survive this marriage, but died 7 May, 1761, in his forty-second year, and was buried in Bunhill Fields. He had married, firstly, says the *Gentleman's Magazine*, "9 November, 1747, at the Quakers' Meeting . . . Miss Sally Morgan, of Stratford," with a fortune of "6000l."

After her husband's death, Mercy Bland went to reside at Norwich, probably to keep house for her brother-in-law, John Oxley,¹ formerly of Warwick, who had

¹ John Oxley, who survived until 1773, was brother to Joseph Oxley, the well-known Minister (whose interesting Journal was published by John Barclay in 1837), and grandfather of the Oxleys of Stoke Newington, the last of whom, Caroline Oxley, survived until 1889, when she died, aged eighty-four.

married her sister, Elizabeth Bell, who had died in 1760, aged thirty-five.

Mercy Bland married, secondly, at Tottenham, 16 May, 1765, as his second wife, Joseph Ransom of Hitchin, mealman, son of Joseph Ransom of the same, baker, and formerly of Southwark, and Mary Burr his wife, and grandson of Richard Ransom, of North Walsham, Norfolk, miller, and Phoebe his wife, of the former of whom there is an account in *Piety Promoted*.

Joseph Ransom of Hitchin, who was Mercy Ransom's senior by some twelve years, died 1779, aged sixty-three, and she had no issue by either husband.

By Joseph Ransom's first wife, Ann Laundry, whom he married in 1744, he had issue, and he was the great-grandfather of the late Alfred and William Ransom of Hitchin, and Edwin Ransom of Bedford, and of the late Margaret Barclay and Mary Ann Seebohm.

Mercy Ransom, who continued to reside at Hitchin until her death, was from youth a religious character, "steady and exemplary and always holding the things that are most excellent in the highest estimation"; and about 1784 became a Minister in the Society and was well known as such throughout the country. She travelled extensively in Great Britain and Ireland, and in some of her services had as her companion her ancient friend, Sarah Crawley.²

In a manuscript diary of Mercy Ransom's in our possession we find the following. In 1792 she went *via* Reading to Bristol, where she visited, with her companion, Hannah Stephenson, the families of Friends at Bristol and Bath, being joined in that service by Deborah Darby and Rebekah Young. She gives the names of all the families visited, and who were the members composing them. During her service at Bristol from the 10 October, 1792 (suspended for a week during that time through Deborah Darby's illness), to the 22 November, she held 190 sittings and visited 691 persons.

² This Friend was born at Hitchin in 1717. Her mother, the daughter of John Field, the compiler of several parts of *Piety Promoted*, remembered William Penn, in whose company she had been. Of Sarah Crawley, who was a Minister for sixty years, and who died in 1799, aged eighty-one, there is an account in *Piety Promoted*.

Mercy Ransom next went to Frenchay, visiting John Hill and his daughters Ann and Elizabeth at their boarding-school there. Later she went to Bath and visited Christiania Gurney and her brother Joseph Freame.

In 1793, she attended the Welsh Yearly Meeting at Carmarthen, where she met Job Scott, who held a meeting at the Theatre, went to Haverfordwest, where she visited Abraham Clibborn and family, Milford Haven, Cardiff, Pontypool, and Abergavenny, from thence returning by stage to London.

Later, with Sarah Crawley, she went to Stotfold, meeting with Rud Wheeler and Isaac Sharples.

She appears to have been in Scotland in 1794.

In 1795, visits were paid to all the Meetings in London, also to the Quarterly Meetings of Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk. When at Norwich she heard of the death of her brother, Benjamin Bell, of Croydon, and returned for the funeral, riding on this journey in all some 783 miles.

In 1796, Mercy Ransom paid visits within the compass of her own Quarterly Meeting, visiting Luton, Hemstead, Chorley Wood, Rickmansworth (where she lodged "at my sister Bland's, her sister Mary and she living together in a house belonging to Cousin Mary Stamper"), St. Albans, and so home to Hitchin.

The same year she went to Worcester by way of Ampthill and Chipping Norton. She visited Bromyard, Leominster, Ross (at Thomas Pritchard's), Tewksbury, Oxford, etc. Of this visit she gives a detailed account of the Friends visited, some 168 in all, and travelling 311 miles.

In 1797, Mercy Ransom, with her esteemed friend, Ann Christy (who as Nanny Christy figures with a green apron in the picture of Gracechurch Street Meeting), visited Friends of Devonshire House Monthly Meeting.

In 1798, with her step-daughter, Ann Ransom, she visited Friends' families in Albans Monthly Meeting. The same year, 24 Ninth Month, she attended "the first Monthly Meeting held at Ampthill since the junction with Baldock, when we had Mary Sterry's company."

The same year also she visited Friends' families of Ratcliff Monthly Meeting, about sixty sittings in all.

In 1801, with her "dear friend, Phebe Lucas," she attended the Monthly Meeting at Hertford, visiting families there.

She concludes her Journal as follows: "Oh how weighty is the work! who is sufficient for these things? no man, as man, nothing that is of the creature, nothing but the fresh pouring forth of the Divine Emanation on the mind of the humbled servant, in every sitting; it is trying to the natural mind to be thus engaged, but that Peace which passeth all human understanding makes up for many difficulties, but oh! how has my mind been sorrowful in some Families, on feeling the insensibility that prevails in Individuals, who profess to be led and guided by the Holy Spirit."

The next year, 1802, Mercy Ransom had a fall, which confined her to the house about six months, but in spite of acute suffering she was able at times to attend her own Meeting, although never recovering her usual health.

During her illness she kept a diary, which, edited by her niece Susanna (Crafton) Day, of Saffron Walden, was published in 1816, after her death, entitled *Some Remarks by way of Diary written by Mercy Ransom during a long confinement by lameness*. This diary commences 30 xii. 1802, and ends 18 xi. 1810.

Mercy Ransom died at Hitchin 25 v. 1811, aged eighty-three, and was buried in Friends' Burial Ground there 2 vi. 1811, having been a Minister some twenty-five years.

In Tenth Month, 1811, Hitchin Monthly Meeting issued a long and appreciative Testimony concerning her, signed by twenty-seven men and nineteen women Friends, which was endorsed by Beds and Herts Quarterly Meeting. The Testimony states that in her last illness she said: "I have loved the Lord with all my heart, with all my soul, and with all my strength, and I hope I have loved my neighbour as myself," and later, "Farewell, farewell, I have an allotment in Heaven."

There is an account of this good woman in *Piety Promoted*, and a facsimile of her signature in *Select Miscellanies*.

A striking silhouette portrait of her by her niece, Susanna Day, dated 1768, also exists.

Mercy Ransom was greatly valued and revered by her relations and friends; she seems to have been quite an oracle in her family, and, like many another Friend, was well up in medicaments and cooking recipes. Amongst manuscripts of hers in our possession are recipes for Lip Salve, Cowslip Wine, Black Puddings, Consumption, Dutch Flummery, "Bleau Mange," etc.

Amongst relics of her are a small trunk with M.R. upon it in brass nails, and a silver apple-scoop, M.R. to M.G., presented by her to her great-niece Mercy Green, of Saffron Walden, formerly Day, upon her marriage, probably in 1795.

We possess a long and neatly written letter from her to her step-daughter, Ann Ransom, of Hitchin, dated Pontypool, 4 v. 1793, which gives an account of her religious services in that neighbourhood. Another letter of 1771, dated Hitchin, to her niece, Susanna Crafton, of Croydon, is one of encouragement in her religious course. A postscript says: "I have received my Gold Buttons, have not paid the charge; if thou have opportunity please do it."

The last entry in the Diary (1797-1803) of her niece Susanna Day reads: "6 January, 1803. Received an alarming account of Aunt Ransom's Health by a Letter from her Daughter [Ann], went over to Hitchin pretty directly—spent three weeks most of the time with Aunt. While I was there Joshua Wheeler was removed by Death. Sister Exton accompanied by Cousin Mary Ransom [later Exton] and [my] daughter Agatha [Day] came over to attend the Interment; staid near a week at Hitchin after which I returned with them to Ampthill and spent most of the week following; came home by way of Hitchin, where my son Richard [Day] met me. Left dear Aunt better. She discovered an Inclination to come over to Walden to spend the remainder of her days with me. I do not find my spirits equal to taking up the subject, neither does it appear practicable in Aunt's very lame infirm state to get her removed so far, so that matter is left for the present."

JOSEPH J. GREEN.

Hastings.