

AUGUSTUS COVE AND THE GRAND JUNCTION CANAL COMPANY

While carrying out research into various activities of the Grand Junction Canal Company, I came across details of some dealings the company had with a Quaker businessman almost two centuries ago and the unfortunate effect that this ultimately had on his relationship with the Society. My research took me at one stage into the Library at Friends' House and it was suggested there that it was a story that might interest Friends. Accordingly, I have written this brief account of what was a long and unhappy story.

Augustus Cove, the Quaker concerned, had a business trading in glass and chinaware at 62 Gracechurch Street in London. Directories show that he was there from at least 1798, but in about 1802 he was forced to start looking for new premises owing to the impending expiry of his lease. Paddington Basin, on an offshoot of the Grand Junction Canal, was then being developed and eventually, with some misgivings, he took a lease of land alongside the basin. He had hesitated because of the shortness of the lease, combined with the unfinished state of the canal and of the road serving his land, but the Company gave him various assurances that finally persuaded him. Although he called in a builder to look at the wharf, he did not think it was worth having any work put in hand at that stage.

Owing to the poor state of the canal there was little trade, but Cove realised that the situation was better at the eastern end of the basin, which was nearer to the City. Accordingly, when he had the opportunity to obtain a sub-lease of wharf No. 2, he took it, moving in next to Pickford and Company, who were at No. 1. They could have taken the sub-lease themselves and extended their premises, but decided not to do so owing to the poor state of the trade. Cove spent a considerable amount of money on the wharf and was very concerned when he heard that Pickfords had begun to regret their decision not to take the wharf, and wanted him to get out. Thomas Pickford served on the canal company's main committee and was a man of some influence.

Pickfords' opportunity came when the leases were shortly due to expire and the company wrote to the leaseholders demanding

increases in rent averaging in excess of 600%. They were deeply distressed about this and called a meeting at which Cove was asked to take the chair. This seems to have caused the canal company to brand him as the ring-leader and they immediately offered Pickford the lease of wharf No. 2. This was done secretly without any notification to Cove and he only heard about it by hint and rumour. In the hope of obtaining some definite statement, he appealed to William Praed, M.P., the company chairman, but received no reply. An appeal that he addressed to the other proprietors was also ignored.

On 25 June 1808 his nightmare began. Without any warning, workmen arrived and began tearing down his buildings and destroying his property, giving him no chance to remove his goods. He took on extra men in the hope of sorting his stock for a general sale but he and his son Thomas (then aged 16) suffered continual harassment for several days. His gates were forced open, his locks destroyed, his fences torn down, his cart and wagon turned out onto the road, and other damage caused. On Saturday 2 July they put a padlock and chain on the wharf and locked him and his son in all that night and throughout the following day and night. On Monday, at about noon, while he was taking an inventory of furniture remaining on the premises, two ruffians burst in and assaulted him. To escape he jumped out of the window, sustaining wounds that had to be dressed by a surgeon. When he complained to Pickford's clerk, he was told that they were determined to have him out that night.

This was achieved with dramatic effect soon after 8 p.m., when Cove's imprisonment at the wharf was brought to an end by two men who arrived and told him that he was arrested. Cove enquired at whose instance this was being done and was told that it was at the suit of the canal company, who claimed that he owed them £85.2s.4d. Despite his protests that he did not owe them a penny he was taken off to Newgate Prison as it was impossible to raise bail at that time, owing to the hour and the reluctance of other wharfingers to risk upsetting the canal company. He left his son and some servants to keep an eye on his remaining property as well as they could and was permitted to call on his wife briefly at their home nearby to tell her what had happened.

It was not until Saturday 9 July that Cove was able to obtain bail and return home. By that time his son and servants had been ejected from the wharf, and a strong cart-horse had been let loose, never to be seen again. Cove estimated his total losses as amounting to about £4,500, excluding items that could not readily be valued, and decided that recourse to the law was the only way in which he might obtain

redress. The first case was moderately satisfactory in that the ruffians who assaulted him were each fined £10, but the canal company defended them and paid their fines, while Cove had to bear his own costs of around £15.

Other cases followed, but the outcome was extremely unsatisfactory as Cove was pitted against a powerful company with considerable influence, and received very unsympathetic treatment in several courts. On one occasion, noticing from his dress that Cove was a Quaker, the opposing counsel used this as an excuse for some very derogatory comments, and was not in any way restrained by the judge trying the case. Many falsehoods and inaccuracies were accepted unchallenged, and there were many irregularities.

As a Quaker, Cove tried to put aside ideas of revenge and retaliation, but became extremely frustrated by the manifest failure of the legal system. Eventually, he recorded the whole story in a written statement which he submitted to Sir Samuel Romilly, one of the leading lawyers of the day. Sir Samuel sympathised with him but doubted whether any fresh legal action would be more successful than the earlier ones. Despite this advice, Cove renewed his efforts at law but, as Sir Samuel had predicted, was no more successful than he had been previously.

As a final gesture, he published the statement he had prepared for Sir Samuel, along with other relevant matter, and put this on sale. It was a substantial book, that ran to two editions, and can be found bound with the story of another man who suffered grievously at the hands of the canal company. Cove had a copper token minted to advertise his books and also published some verses entitled '*Parity*'. There were two parallel sets of verses, one about Napoleon and the other about the canal company, Cove's intention being to draw attention to their similarity in such matters as tyranny and oppression, and they could be sung to the tune of a popular song of the day. In his own handwriting, Cove recorded on copies of his '*Parity*' how this influenced his relationship with the Society: 'It was for giving Publicity to this Parity and refusing to say that I was not Justified and that I was Sorry for it – neither of which had been True – the Society of Friends (Quakers) to their indelible Disgrace Disowned me. (Signed) Aug. Cove.'

From records still held by the Society, it seems that Cove had been seen in the street selling matches and distributing copies of his ballad. This was felt to be conduct unbecoming a Quaker and two Friends duly visited him to point out the error of his ways, but he refused to express any regret and on 16 May 1811 he was disowned. His son Thomas was also visited by Friends but he apologised and was

allowed to remain in membership. Cove's wife Sarah and infant son Henry also remained in membership and Henry later achieved some prominence in the Society. He was Registering Officer for Marriages for Tottenham Meeting from 1867 until his death in his 89th year at the home of his son-in-law, William Blunson, in Northampton in 1896.

Little more is known about Augustus Cove, although it would seem that he was not so completely ruined as one might be inclined to assume from the fact that he was apparently reduced to selling matches in the street. Despite the great losses he suffered in Paddington, he was somehow able to afford to obtain the opinion of a leading lawyer, to have two substantial books published, and to have an advertising token struck. Quaker records show that there were other Coves in membership in London at that time, one a mercer (a dealer in cloth) and the other a coal merchant, and it is possible that they were relations and gave him assistance. At all events, it is known that he moved from Chapel Street, Paddington, to Bishopgate in 1814 and directories from 1815 to 1834 show him as having a china and glass warehouse at 31 Houndsditch. His son Thomas had a similar business at 5 Charles Street and Goodge Street in 1833-4.

Looking back on this case, it is difficult not to sympathise with Cove. The injustices he seems to have suffered (partly because he was a Quaker) clearly seem to have obsessed him and it is possible that sheer frustration caused him to become a little unbalanced. Even so, it is hard to see that, even by the strict standards of the day, disownment was justified. He was undoubtedly, and quite deliberately, adopting a high profile that might have become embarrassing to Friends, and was actually publishing verses that could be sung to a popular tune of the day, but these do not seem to be particularly serious offences. Would they lead to disownment today? It seems highly unlikely. I am particularly saddened by the thought that if Augustus Cove was today offered posthumous reinstatement into the Society, he would probably reject it, were he in a position to do so. Other members of his family seem to have been less inflexible and it would be interesting to know whether any of them are still connected with the Society.

Stanley A. Holland

Author's Note

This article was originally submitted to *The Friend* some years ago but was not thought to be suitable in view of its historical nature. It then got put on one side but came to light again recently, and I decided to send it unamended to the Editor

of the *Journal of the Friends Historical Society*. This accounts for the fact that it does not have the usual list of references which readers might reasonably expect. I must apologise for this but it would be extremely difficult and time-consuming at this stage to retrace my steps, and pin-point the source of every detail that I recorded. I hope that this omission will not cause offence.

It will be apparent that most of my information was derived from Cove's writings, in particular the second edition (1813) of *The Tocsin Sounded, or a Libel Extraordinary*, which is described as being "dedicated to the good sense of the People of England", followed by a summary, in flamboyant style, of the injustices Cove claimed to have suffered. It is of course a matter of subjective judgement if I say that Cove's many complaints, when stripped of their florid style, seemed to have the ring of truth about them and I saw no reason to doubt him. I checked the Canal Company minutes held in the Public Record Office but could find no reference to the affair, and it seems that the actions taken, e.g. in connection with Court proceedings, must have been approved by a committee under delegated powers.

It is possible that I might have obtained some information about the Court cases from official sources, but I was not able to pursue this interesting but very time-consuming line of enquiry. As indicated, I was able to obtain valuable information from trade directories and from records held in the Library at Friends House. I obtained information about the life of Sir Samuel Romilly, but there was nothing there of relevance. I might add that this was not the only time the Canal Company was accused of behaving in a harsh, overbearing, and possibly illegal manner.

A PARITY, *It was for giving Publicity to this Parity - and refer only to say I was not a Lintickel, & that was To the Tune of "THE DUSKY NIGHT, &c." Jolly for it - (mention of which had been said) - the Society of Friends (Quakers) to their Admirable Progress*

Discour'd me.
Aug 1841

To the Tune of "THE DUSKY NIGHT, &c." Jolly for it - (mention of which
had been said) - the Society of Friends
(Quakers) to their Admirable Progress

I.

When Bonaparte (*a*)
Began to start,
Upon his grand career;
Nations amaz'd,
With wonder gaz'd,
But not unmix'd with fear.

CHORUS.

A most surprising man,
A most surprising man,
A most surprising man indeed,
A most surprising man.

II.

His genius great,
Propitious fate.
His large-capacious mind;
Exited thought
Of *all or naught*,
Of *Death or unconform'd*.
A most, &c.

I.

When that Ca-nal,
Which some folks call,
The Great, or the Grand Junction.
Began to flow,
Great London to,
And exercise its function.

CHORUS.

A Grand Junction of Rogues,
A Grand Junction of Rogues,
A Grand Junction of Rogues indeed,
A Grand Junction of Rogues.

II.

Its prospects great,
Did much elate,
Projectors of the scheme;
Some people prais'd,
Whilst others gaz'd,
And call'd it but a dream.
A Grand, &c.

KEY TO VARIOUS FEATURES SHOWN ON PLAN

- D. The wharf that Cove took first at £35 p.a.
- E. The towing path.
- F. A road leading from Harrow Road to wharves on the north side of the basin.
- G. Paddington Church and churchyard.
- K. Warehouse and ground occupied by Pickford & Co.
- L. The original wharf taken by Pickford & Co.
- M. No. 2 wharf sold by Roper & Co to Cove.
- N. Cove's residence at 35 Chapel Street.
- R. A stretch of water originally intended to be part of the canal.
- S. The point to which the road was completed in a westerly direction when Cove brought wharf 16-17.
- T. The steam engine house and reservoir of the Grand Junction Water Works.

