

THE LOST LEGACY?

We doubt whether many readers will have heard of the William Gunn Charity but the essential details of it have appeared in the recently produced *Directory of Quaker and Quaker-related Grant-making Trusts* which has been compiled by Martin Rowntree of Leeds. This directory should be readily available in Quaker circles and information about it can be obtained from Britain Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends.

Our main purpose now is to write something of interest and to seek the help of anyone who can give us information about William Gunn himself, about past trustees of the Charity, and about any aspect of the Charity's history. This last includes one particular aspect which has puzzled us very much, as will become evident below.

The present writers are trustees of the William Gunn Charity which was established by the will of William Gunn (1738-1828) who by trade was a patten maker living on Ratcliff Highway. He was for a time a member of Worcester Monthly Meeting and was married at Worcester Meeting House in 1765 to Ann Corbyn (1739-1797). Though William Gunn had these ties with Worcester, he was much more strongly associated with the area around Bow in Middlesex where most of his life was spent. Throughout this time he was an active member of Ratcliff Monthly Meeting where he became overseer and elder.

In his will of 1813 he left two separate sums of £1,000 for the relief of needy Quakers. To be specific, he left £1,000 (£500 in his will plus £500 in a codicil) to Worcester MM, (since 1859 Worcester & Shropshire MM), naming three trustees whose responsibility it was to look after this legacy which, in accordance with his instructions, was invested in the 1726 3% Annuities. He left an identical amount (£500 in his will plus £500 in a codicil) to Ratcliff MM (since 1821 Ratcliff & Barking MM), to be invested in precisely the same way with precisely the same instructions as to its use. Again he named three trustees.

The trustees for Worcester were John Pumphrey (1739-1834), John Pumphrey (Jnr.) (1775-1835) and Julius Pumphrey (1778-1856). Those for Ratcliff were Richard Bowman (*ca.* 1758-1844), Charles Palmer (1759-1831) and Samuel Marsh (Jnr.) (1777-1854).

There were always to be three trustees who were to be appointed from members of Worcester MM on the one hand and Ratcliff MM on the other. Whenever a trustee died, the remaining trustees were to seek a replacement from amongst the members of their respective monthly meeting. Oddly, William Gunn does not appear to have envisaged the

resignation of any trustee, since he says nothing about replacements for this reason.

The present writers have researched the history of the Worcester branch of the Charity and we are very grateful to the Library staff at Friends House for supplying us with welcome biographical information. We have inherited from earlier Worcester trustees a certain amount of material but not very much. Our oldest paper dates back to 1874 but documentation is scarce and does not begin to accumulate until the 1960s.

In 1978 we became curious as to what had happened to the Ratcliff branch of the William Gunn Charity so, between February and June of that year we corresponded with some Friends of Ratcliff & Barking MM. The outcome was that they had no knowledge of any such charity.

Then, a few years ago, we decided it was time to write a history of the Worcester William Gunn Charity. Despite the paucity of our records, through our researches we managed to accomplish three things. First we were able to trace with a high degree of accuracy, the progress of William Gunn's Worcester bequest as it was translated from one investment to another, that is, from the original 1726 Annuities investment up to its present placing with the Charities Official Investment Fund (COIF). Secondly, we were able to draw up a chronological list of former trustees, though we have probably not been able to discover more than about three-quarters of them. Thirdly, we were able to assemble a certain amount of biographical and contextual information.

It was at this stage that our research revealed that there was an anomaly.

When we came to list the names of the trustees, we noticed that until about 1916 we had four, and sometimes five, trustees in office at the same time, though in his will, William Gunn is quite explicit in requiring the Charity to have exactly three trustees. Under the will, they were instructed to act as follows:

1st that the three trustees do divide the interest every half year as it become due into three equal parts that any one of them may hand to a poor Friend being a Member of the Society of Friends a sum not exceeding one guinea in the space of six months nevertheless if they should find it in a particular case to be prudent and necessary they may unite and give a guinea each to a poor Friend...

We then checked the trustees' biographies. This revealed another anomaly which was that seven trustees had no connection with Worcester but did have close connections with Ratcliff. These were William Nash (1790-1879); James Barringer (Snr.) (1810-1891); Edwin

Thorne (1837-1914); Isaac Sharp (1847-1917); James Barringer (Jnr.) (1848-1932); Samuel Giles (1851-1894); Alfred Henry Wright (1870-1956). The only slight qualification to the above is that Edwin Thorne moved to Worcestershire to spend the last six years of his life with one of his sons.

In thinking over this problem we gave passing consideration to the idea that Worcester and Ratcliff might have been operating a system of joint trusteeship. The initial difficulty with this is that it flies contrary to the rules for the foundation of the two trusts, while further reflection soon suggested that such an arrangement would have been highly inconvenient to all concerned. We therefore dismissed this hypothesis.

We next considered the case of one of the 'Ratcliff Seven', Isaac Sharp, who was a prominent Friend in his day, a headmaster, a writer and contributor to various journals and, from 1890-1917, Recording Clerk to London Yearly Meeting. He was an influential figure and had been overseer, elder, and clerk to Ratcliff & Barking MM.

We have two documents of his, the second of which is dated '14.V.1914'. It consists of a signed statement made by him in response to a query from the Inland Revenue respecting the William Gunn Charity. It names six trustees, past and present, as follows: Sharp himself, both the Barringers, Thorne, Giles and Nash. The first letter, dated '6.V.1914', names Alfred Henry Wright as a replacement for Edwin Thomas who had died earlier that year.

Isaac Sharp's two letters nowhere refer to Worcester but it was very natural for us to assume that all the papers handed down to us related to the Worcester foundation of the William Gunn Charity.

However, considering Isaac Sharp's active life and his long and close associations with Ratcliff and the London area, and considering also the fact that the other six trustees had Ratcliff and not Worcester associations, we now recognise that these two letters from Isaac Sharp must refer only to the Ratcliff branch of the Charity. Yet that is not the end of the tale. We continued our enquiries and a short time ago the Charity Commission sent us copies of two statements which summarize William Gunn's wishes as laid down in his will. They contain a few careless slips but we are not much concerned with the contents of the two statements since we already possess similar summaries.

What is of interest in both cases is first the heading of each statement, and secondly the three-line comment or explanation which appears at the foot of the statements proper. The point about the heading is that one clearly states 'Society of Friends/Worcester Monthly Meeting' and the other 'Society of Friends/Ratcliffe Monthly Meeting'. The three-line footnote to each is dated 1916 so that we now have confirmation

that the Ratcliff branch of the William Gunn Charity was in existence in 1916 and presumably had been in continuous existence since its foundation in 1828.

These identical footnotes read as follows:

The endowment is now (1916) understood to be represented by £1,317 : 8 : 8 Consols in the names of Alfred Henry Wright, James Barrington and Isaac Sharp.

'Barrington' represents one of the writer's slips. It should, of course, read 'Barringer' but, other slips apart, the writer, although he or she knows that there were two distinct William Gunn Charities, one based at Worcester and one based at Ratcliff, has made the mistake of assigning the Ratcliff trustees to both branches of the Charity.

The three Worcester trustees in 1914 were Joseph Dawe Clark who remained a trustee until his death in 1920, Alfred Sparkes who was a trustee until his death in 1923 (in fact, he was still 'officially' a trustee until 1924!), and Sarah Agnes Squire who was appointed a trustee in October 1914 and who continued in office till 1931. Moreover, the Worcester bequest of £1,000 was, in 1916, still invested in the 4½% Debenture Stock of the Great Western Railway Company where it had remained since 1874 and almost certainly since 1863. It did not move from the Great Western until the nationalisation of the railways on January 1st 1948 when it was converted into British Transport Stock.

Our conclusion, therefore, is that William Gunn's £1,000 bequest to Ratcliff MM was still in existence in 1916. It has taken us some time to assemble information unavailable at the time of our 1978 enquiry. We can only guess that at a date after 1916 their legacy was amalgamated with that of some other charity and subsumed under another name, which would be why our Friends in Ratcliff & Barking knew nothing of it.

However, we feel that there may be someone in that area who knows what happened to the bequest after 1916 and we should not be surprised if the Monthly Meeting minutes (or other documents) of Ratcliff & Barking do not contain at least a mention of it. We have only been able to pay one visit to the library of Friends House, on which occasion we inspected the minutes as carefully and as extensively as we could in the time available. We found quite an amount of interesting information about William Gunn, William Nash and others, but we discovered nothing about William Gunn's will or the setting up of the Charity in 1828. Indeed, so far as we could see, there was no mention of the Charity at all.

There is much we do not know about the history of the William Gunn Charity. Even in respect of the Worcester foundation we are short of information, and there must be a number of trustees whose names are unknown to us. It is unfortunate that at one stage the Worcester MM minutes for the years 1763-1840 were ruined in the early years of the twentieth century when water from a faulty still (an urn or variety of water heater used in catering), seeped into the safe containing the minutes.

We should be pleased to hear from anyone who can supply us with information. If we receive none, we shall be disappointed though not surprised in view of the passage of time and the lack of documentation. On the other hand we should be delighted if there was anyone, especially in the London area who might be interested enough and generous enough to conduct research on our behalf.

In the circumstances it does not now seem likely that we shall learn much about the early days of the Charity, or about the nature of the claims for assistance made on it both then and later. Even so, it is possible that we may learn the names of trustees at present unknown to us and it is quite likely that we could discover something more about the founder himself, William Gunn. We may have missed references when we searched the Ratcliff & Barking MM minute books; yet as he was a well-known and long lived local trader and manufacturer, there may be material about him in other sources.

Our knowledge of the Ratcliff William Gunn foundation is minimal which perhaps suggests that there is information about it waiting to be uncovered. In particular we are very interested to know what happened to the Ratcliff bequest in or after 1916. That date is not so very distant and we cannot imagine that records do not exist or that memories can be stirred.

We are engaged in writing a short history of the William Gunn Charity. It is intended mainly for private circulation but we should be happy to send a copy to anyone who applies to us for one. We have suspended work on it for the moment in the hope that this present article will produce further information, but we expect to complete the task later this year or early in 1997.

Finally, we shall be glad to try to answer any questions that readers may like to put to us.

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Friends of Ratcliff & Barking MM look forward to reassuring readers about their care of the William Gunn Trust in a future issue of the *Journal*. – *Editor*.