

Our Recording Clerks

Continued from vol. xxix, p. 45

No. 12. JAMES BOWDEN, 1844-1857, and the Era of the Registers.

HITHERTO in following the line of Clerks to the Society we have viewed the work undertaken by a head-clerk and one or two assistants, we shall now have to visualize an increased number of helpers engaged transcribing the mass of material sent up from the country, containing records of births, marriages and burials from the early days of the Society.

Parish Registers date from the time of Henry VIII. In the middle of the seventeenth century George Fox (influenced perhaps by the position of his father as churchwarden) early instituted a system of registration "that one or two Friends in every Meeting do take an account of all the marriages, births and burials, and carry them to the Monthly Meetings and record them all in one book which is to be kept for the whole County" (in a paper headed: "Friends Fellowship must be in the Spirit" and generally known as Fox's "Canons and Institutions", dated 1669). See *Camb. Jnl.* ii. 416, and *Supp. to Jnl.* 177, where Fox is noted as "Looking after ye Records", 1687.

Other nonconforming bodies were less careful in the matter of registration, but there were about in the country registers more or less accurately kept; and the condition of these non-parochial registers claiming the attention of Parliament resulted in the passing in 1836 of an Act establishing a system of civil registration throughout England and Wales, the finally fixed date for the commencement of the operation of the Act being June 30, 1837.

A copy of the Act was brought to the Meeting for Sufferings, and introduced by George Stacey, on the 2nd of 9 mo. 1836, and sixteen Friends were appointed a committee to consider the effect of the Act upon Friends' system of registration. John Hodgkin (then Junior) was added later and he took a prominent part in the proceedings. In First Month, 1837, G. Stacey, J. Hodgkin and W. Manley had an interview with the Board of the Registration Commission

and a year later, after the Parliamentary Committee to which the subject was referred had been discharged, the whole matter was committed to the care of John Hodgkin, George Stacey, Josiah Forster, Joseph Neatby, Robert Forster and Abram R. Barclay.

The presence of registers sent up from all parts of the country for surrender to the Government suggested the advisability of having copies made, and the Yearly Meeting having approved the suggestion, the abstraction was put in hand under the management of James Bowden, "a young Cornishman". Bowden gathered round him a staff of transcribers of whose work there are several records, which do not record much appreciation of their occupation.

"Address to the Meeting for Sufferings from those employed on the Registers, 5 mo. 1840 :

"To the Committee of Sufferings on the Registers :

"Understanding that in consequence of the Yearly Meeting, our operations must of necessity be suspended and presuming that our services may be required to complete the work after that period, we, the undersigned Transcribers and others respectfully submit the following to your consideration, viz.

"That many of us have families entirely dependent upon our exertions for support, and as most probably we shall be unemployed during that period, our means of providing for them will necessarily be very limited ; that the healths of several of us have been injured by the close application which it has been necessary to bestow upon the work ; and although two or three weeks relaxation would be highly beneficial, we could ill afford to lose the time.

"If therefore upon taking the above statement into consideration you could allow some compensation, the parties concerned would feel obliged,

and remain, Respectfully your Friends

W[illiam] J[esse] Waller

James Morley

H[enry] O[wen] Tahourdin

J[ohn] P[aine] Martin

E[dward] D[ynes] Hayward

Will. R[oberts] Barritt

S[amuel] Gravely

David Doeg, Junr.

R[ichard] P[etipher] Batger

Jno. Meek

Jeffreys Paull

James Giles

Alexander Cudland

Abr^m Wallis."

Another transcriber named John Perry found no great pleasure or satisfaction in his work, he writes :

“ Today I sat eleven hours at writing only for four shillings—closely engaged every day in my new occupation transcribing for which I am very badly paid—every day has been engaged closely & very laboriously in making the Registers for which I am miserably paid. 4 mo. 11, 1840, I gave up writing on the Registers *without any regret*, having engaged with another & much better occupation.” He was approaching sixty at this period.

“ Meeting for Sufferings, 6th of 11 mo. 1840.

“ The time having arrived at which it is needful to decide upon the question whether the Registers of Births, Marriages and Deaths amongst Friends in England and Wales, from the origin of the Society to the end of the 6th month, 1837, should be surrendered to the Registration Commissioners, this Meeting thinks it right, in recording its conclusion on this important subject, to enter upon its minutes a statement of the circumstances which have called for this decision, and an outline of the course which has been pursued in reference to these valuable documents.

“ A commission was appointed by the Crown in the year 1836 to enquire into the state of all non-parochial Registers in England and Wales, and to consider of proper measures for facilitating their reception in evidence : and in compliance with the requisition of the Commissioners, the several Monthly, Quarterly and General Meetings of Friends throughout England and Wales were applied to to send up their Registers for inspection with a view to their obtaining the stamp of official approbation. The Commissioners in their Report to the Crown spoke of them in very commendatory terms. They had ‘ visited their place of deposit, and saw enough of their state and condition to testify that they exhibit an admirable specimen of the state to which order and precision may be carried in the classification and arrangement of records of this description.’

“ The total number of these volumes now in the custody of William Manley on behalf of the Society is [85], containing about 260,000 entries of Births, 40,000 entries of Marriages, and 310,000 entries of Deaths. At an early stage of the business, this Meeting was of the opinion that it would

be desirable that advantage should be taken of the opportunity afforded by the several Register Books being thus brought together in one place to form a complete Alphabetical and Chronological index or digested transcript of the whole of the entries within each Quarterly and General Meeting respectively.

“ This work, which has received the cordial concurrence and sanction of the Yearly Meeting, has been attended with great labour and expense, but it is believed that the digest thus prepared will be of very important practical advantage to the Society at large, and to all persons interested in these Records.

“ In the interval between the presentation of the Report of the Commissioners and the passing of the late Act 3 and 4 Vict. chap. 92, repeated applications were made both to the Government and to Members of the Legislature in order to obtain for our Society the benefit of the proposed enactment in favour of Non-parochial Registers, without surrendering the said Records to the custody of a Metropolitan Office, an arrangement which, under the circumstances, it was not thought unreasonable to ask for. These efforts having all proved unavailing the Act referred to at length passed, giving the proposed Advantages to such parochial Registers only as should be surrendered before the 10th of the 11th month instant, and should be approved by the Commissioners. In anticipation of the probability of such an enactment, the last Yearly Meeting issued a Minute to its subordinate Meetings recommending them to authorize this Meeting to make such arrangements in regard to the surrender or other disposition of their Registers as might appear to be most for the benefit of the Society and the furtherance of the usefulness of the said documents, and directing this Meeting to correspond with the several Meetings in order to obtain their concurrence herein. . . .

“ Under these circumstances the Meeting has proceeded with much care and deliberation at several sittings (two of which were specially held for the purpose) to take into its consideration the whole question thus referred to it by the Yearly Meeting and the several subordinate Meetings. It sets a high value upon these interesting and important Records, which, besides their intrinsic worth as documents of Pedigree, it regards as a proof of the faithfulness, the wisdom,

and the diligence of our worthy Elder, George Fox, and of the other pious and enlightened men who were the instruments of first gathering our Religious Society. . . .

“ Acting on these views our forefathers were led to establish very simple yet guarded provision for the celebration of Marriage as a religious act, and to form a systematic and efficient plan of Registration; and the course which they pursued herein and which with some modification has been steadily followed for nearly two centuries, we cannot but regard as satisfactory evidences of the help which was afforded in the faithful support of a Christian Testimony, whilst the authority and respect conceded to our Marriages and Registers may be regarded as a token of the blessing which has rested upon their faithfulness herein. . . .

“ It is moreover computed that at the present day the number of persons not members of our Religious Society who are directly interested in our Registers as documents of Pedigree greatly exceeds the total number of our own members who are so interested: and this Meeting has strongly felt the duty imposed upon the Society as Trustees of so valuable a deposit for both these classes, not to stand in the way of this legislative measure for consolidating and giving full efficiency in all respects to these documents.

“ Taking these and other circumstances into consideration and bearing also in mind the example which our Religious Society has been careful to set of a cheerful compliance with the arrangements of the Civil Government in all matters in which conscience is not violated, this Meeting has come to the conclusion that it will best discharge the important and responsible trust reposed in it by surrendering all our Registers, from the origin of the Society to the end of the 6th month, 1837, to the Commissioners with a view to their being placed, if approved by the said Commissioners, under the care of the Registrar General and entitled to all the privileges conferred by the Act of Parliament already referred to. . . .”

At the conclusion of the work of the transcription of the Registers, the committee in charge reported as follows to the Meeting for Sufferings, 11 v. 1842 :

“ It may now be well to consider this great work as completed; and in making this suggestion, they feel bound to

record their high sense of the value to the Society, as well as to the public more at large, of the services of their friend, James Bowden, to whose unwearied and assiduous care, in connexion with peculiar qualifications, the work is mainly indebted for its satisfactory accomplishment. The committee believe that the digested copy and the several transcripts [supplied to the Quarterly Meetings] are as nearly perfect as, from the nature of the work, could reasonably be expected."

There is no word of thanks to the transcribers !

The late William Beck, in a note to the Librarian, sent him at the commencement of these articles, wrote of a " power of analysis and general grasp of this somewhat intricate business " exhibited in James Bowden, " then a young man fresh from Cornwall ".

Information came to hand later that there were Registers still in the possession of Meetings or individual Friends, or even of persons not members, and in 1848 the Yearly Meeting instructed its executive Meeting to pursue the matter. This resulted in the receipt of various Registers, and a digest was made of these before their surrender, known as " Supplements ", 27 vols.

James Bowden was born at Liskeard, Cornwall, in 1811, son of John Bowden, a farmer, and Mary Barbery, his wife. In 1847 he married Amelia Gilkes, daughter of Benjamin Gilbert Gilkes, of Croydon, and niece of Peter Bedford, he being then of 12 St. Helen's Place, Bishopsgate, and became the father of two daughters, Maria Bedford (b. 1848), and Eliza Sophia (b. 1851) and a son, Alfred James (b. 1850). Amelia Bowden died in 1853, at the age of thirty-six, and in 1857 the widower became the husband of Hannah Marsh, Jr., daughter of John Finch Marsh, of Croydon. The union was of brief duration ; Hannah Bowden died in 1859, at the birth of her child, at the same age as her predecessor. Her father recalls the event fourteen years later, adding " Precious indeed is her memory " (*John Finch Marsh*, 1873, p. 30). Her sister, Priscilla Pitt, published under the title *Poetical Remains of Hannah Bowden*, in 1860, a collection of her many fugitive pieces. William Ball dedicated a few verses to her memory in his *Memorials*

of *Kindred and Friends Departed*, 1865 ; see also Armitage's *Quaker Poets*, 1896. Alfred James Bowden died in Victoria, Australia, in 1888. For many years the two daughters conducted a school at Nailsworth in Gloucestershire.

In 1844 J. Bowden was appointed an Overseer by Devonshire House Monthly Meeting. John Pryor in his notes on the Monthly Meeting (in **D**) records his objection to this :

“ Because he was just appointed the Clerk of the Society and because he had preached for more than three years and had not been acknowledged ” (vol. ii. p. 41). Further volumes of John Pryor's Notes reveal considerable divergence of view from that of J. Bowden. According to John Pryor, Bowden took a prominent position in the affairs of Devonshire House Monthly Meeting, and freely expressed his opinion.

On the retirement of William Manley and presumably about the close of his work on the Registers, James Bowden was appointed Recording Clerk with a committee of reference and Isaac Patching as Assistant. The amounts paid him were : Meeting for Sufferings £50, Six Weeks Meeting £50, Ackworth School £20. In addition to his clerical work he found time during the thirteen years for study and writing. His principal work was his two volume *History of Friends in America*, published in 1850-54 (one copy in **D** is inscribed : “ Peter Bedford from his affectionate nephew, the author ”). In 1857 he prepared an introduction to the two volumes of the reprint of the Yearly Meeting Epistles. An increase of salary was made in 1855, and the duties of the Recording Clerk were detailed in a minute of the Meeting for Sufferings.

But two years later, 6 xi. 1857, occurs this minute of the Meeting for Sufferings :

“ A letter has been now received from James Bowden tendering his resignation as Recording Clerk to the Society. The proposal has obtained the serious attention of the meeting and it is concluded to accept the same.”

There is doubtless much behind this short statement into which we need not enquire too closely, but the following extracts from minutes will fill in the period between this resignation and the death of J. Bowden in 1887.

In 1855 the family had moved from Devonshire House to Kingston M.M. and settled at Croydon. A further

resignation took place eight years later as recorded in the minutes of the M.M. 24 xii. 1863 :

“ Minute of Kingston M.M. 24 xii. 1863 :

“ A letter has been received from James Bowden tendering his resignation of membership in our Society, and further information has been communicated by the Overseers as to the circumstances which induced him to take this step and which show that his conduct has been unguarded and indiscreet ; tending to bring reproach on himself and on us as a church. After serious deliberation this Meeting concludes to accept James Bowden’s resignation.”

18 xi. 1874, J. B. applied for reinstatement, but his application was sent on to Westminster and Longford M.M. within the compass of which he was then living. His application reads as follows :

“ Dear Friends. It is now about 11 years since I resigned my membership amongst you. Throughout this long period, however, I have felt my peace concerned in steadily continuing the attendance of your Meetings for Worship, though often under much trial of mind, and deep has been the sorrow which has filled my mind with regard to the circumstances which led to my resignation.

“ The time has, however, I believe, now arrived when it is right for me to seek for a reinstatement of membership, and should it please my Heavenly Father to make way for it in the hearts of my friends, it would not only prove to me a source of comfort and consolation but a strength and encouragement also to press forward in the path of true peace.

“ I am your sincere friend,

“ JAS. BOWDEN.

“ 13 George St.

“ Mansion Hse,

“ 21.10.74.”

The M.M. appointed Joseph Bevan Braithwaite and Robert Kemp to visit the applicant and they brought in a report, which has the following sentences :

“ He entered with much feeling into the causes that led to his resignation, expressing his deep sorrow for his mis-steppings, with the humble trust that in great mercy the transgression had been forgiven. . . . We were agreeably impressed with our interview and shall be quite satisfied

if the Mo. Mtg. unites with us in taking a favourable view of the application."

But the Monthly Meeting did not unite and decided after a month's delay, "not to accede to the proposal made by him".

Presumably he passed his remaining days with his daughters at Nailsworth. He was buried at Shortwood, under the impression of his friends that he was a member of Devonshire House M.M. but the membership was afterwards questioned.

In Appendix II to his *Statistics of Insanity*, 1845, Dr. Thurnam, of The Retreat, York, acknowledges his "obligation to the respected recording clerk of the Society, James Bowden" for his work on "Contributions to the Statistics of the Society of Friends". He also refers to the Friends Registers and the Act of Parliament.

To be continued.

Unsuccessful Proposals for Marriage

"I was at Falmouth to meeting last week; friends mostly well there. Ann Dale and A. Womersly are at Roscrow on a visit, the former keeps a handsome Carriage—she is the Person Joshua made an offer to, but it is quite over. A. Womersly is the person that Edwin Price paid his addresses to, but that is also at an end as Edwin is still in a consumption & it was thought best to give the matter up on both sides. . . His sister Junia."

Anna (Thomas) Thompson, from Belair near Penryn, to her daughter Mary Westlake, of Southampton. 8th mo. 19th, 1818.

[A.D. had numerous suitors. She married William Ball.]

Engaged Couples in One House

Quarter-Meeting 29 day 10/mo. 1680 :

"Whereas a case was stated Concerning Friends that live together in one house & are concerned in relation to Marriage, the question was whether two friends so Concerned dwelling in one house should be seperated from each other during their Concern before Marriage; its the advice of this Meeting that the one of them remove, becaus the Continuance of such together in one family have tended to ye dishonour of Truth & grief of ye Faithful."

From Minute Book of Marsden (Lancashire) Preparative Meeting, 1696-1733, in D.