

Early Friends and the Post

AT the time George Fox commenced his ministry the postal system of England was in its infancy. In 1635 Charles I, by Royal Proclamation, had appointed one Thomas Witherings to settle the posts between London and Edinburgh, Holyhead and Dublin, Plymouth and other parts. From that year onward, until 1649, the office of Master of the Posts was held by grant from the Crown. During the period of the Commonwealth a system of farming the posts was introduced with the object of securing a portion of the revenue from the conveyance of letters to the State. On the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 the revenue from the farmer, Henry Bishop of Henfield, Sussex, totalled £21,500. Three years later, 1663, the revenue was settled on the Duke of York, subject to a substantial payment to the King. This practice continued until the coming of William and Mary in 1688. The farmer, or as we should call him to-day contractor, had to arrange for horses to be in readiness along the principal roads of England and for post boys to ride the horses and carry the mails. In the condition of the roads at that time the task was no easy one. Few of the original records of the farmers have survived, but in the Record Room of the General Post Office in London there is one such in the letter book of Colonel Whitley, who acted as Deputy Postmaster-General under Lord Arlington from 1672-77. The letters in this book are an eloquent testimony to the difficulty of transport on the roads at that period. King's letters and letters sent by express (the latter a costly business) had precedence over the ordinary post. Places off the main post roads were served by local carriers. This fact explains why nearly all the early letters addressed to George Fox and Margaret Fell at Swarthmore were addressed care of local shop-keepers at Lancaster and Kendal to be forwarded as directed.

In the Spence, Swarthmore and other MSS. in the Library at Friends House there are many interesting examples of this form of address, of which the following are examples :

1653. For Margrett Fell. John Wilson and horse desired to goe with speed & deliver this at Swarthmore. With care and speed.

1655. H. H. For my deare friend Edward Pyatt att the Gaoler, his house in Launceston, deliver in Cornwall haste haste.
1656. For my Beloved friend Margrett Fell at Swarthmore in Furness this deliver Lancashire. Leave this at Thomas Green's, dyer, at his house in Lancaster, to be sent as above said.
1657. For His dearly beloved Friend M. Fell at Swarthmore. Leave this with Geo. Taylor at his shopp in Kendal.

The above were sent in all probability through the medium of the post, but it is less certain if the following could have been :

1653. For my deare Brother called by the world George Fox in Cumberland.

In the Swarthmore Collection there is a letter from Anthony Pearson, dated May 9th, 1653, in which the following sentence appears :

Dear Friend, there is a carrier comes from Kendal, within a mile of my house, every fortnight, and he shall call at Peter Higgin's, to bring any letter that shall be there left for me ; it will much refresh me to receive any lines from thee.

A letter from Henry Fell, who was on a visit to the Barbados in 1656 is thus addressed :

For the Hands of my deer Friend Margrett Fell, at Swarthmore in Lancashire these. Leave this letter at Robert Dring's house at ye Harrow in Watling Street in London to be sent as above directed with care and speed.

Evidence of the use of the Government post before 1660 is supplied by the following :

For my dearly beloved friend George Fox att the signe of the Flower de luce in Thomas Apostle this with care deliver London. The post not paid from Dunstable.

The Flower de luce was the house of Gerrard Roberts, wine cooper, whose shop was made much use of by Friends sending

letters through London. Writing on 4th of 7 mo. 1657 to Margaret Fell, John Stubbs says :

Thy letter of the 17th of the 6 mo. I received upon the 6th day of 7th mo. in Gerrard Roberts' house.

Before the year 1660 there was nothing in the nature of an impressed postmark in use, so that it is somewhat difficult to determine whether certain letters were actually conveyed by the official post. The evidence however seems to indicate that the early Friends used to post freely during the periods of acute persecution, and never tried to keep what they were thinking and writing from the eyes of the law. There were temptations to smuggle letters through by unauthorized channels, for the monopoly claimed by the Crown was hotly contested over a long period by the carriers and public generally. That Friends did at times give countenance to this smuggling is brought out in the following extract from a letter written in 1683 by Sarah Mead to R. Abraham at Swarthmore :

If Ja Geldart intend to come to London againe with Lettrs, tell him its now very difficult for any to carry any Lettrs, all persons being prohibited by Proclamation ; save the Post : & men are sett to watch at all parts of ye Citty, to search any they suspect, for Lettrs, & at highgate a strict watch is sett : all this is done by ye Duke of Yorkes officers to advance ye post office ; soe I write this, yt he need not be surprized ; but my advice is to him, if he come againe, to send all his Lettrs by the Carrier, packt up amonge his goods, else he is very like to come to trouble, if he bringe any lettrs himselfe, & if he fall into their hands, he will not easily gett quitt, some saith a person will be sett to watch in every Inn in London to prevente ye carriage of Lettrs by private persons, which if so, I doubt it will discourage his new Employment ; tell him what I write & lett him doe as he think good.

In the *Swarthmore Account Book* Sarah Fell records numerous payments for letters sent to Lancaster, of which the following are examples :

1673.	Oct. 16 ^o Pd for letter to sister Lower	4d.
	Nov. 29 ^o by mo given a man for carrieinge	
	2 Lettrs to Lancr	4d.

1675. Nov. 4° by mo pd Higgins¹ for Carrienge
Lettrs to Lancr & bringinge all by Lettrs
for a yre endinge ye 11° inst 4s.
1676. May 4° by mo pd Kelly of Dalton for
bringinge a Lettr from Tho: Curwen from
London, his Acct. 2d.
- July 4° by mo pd [higgins] for 9 lettrs to
Father 4s. 1d.

A letter which Margaret Fell addressed to Oliver Cromwell was doubtless carried to London by some trusty friend and handed over to Francis Howgill, who wrote 5th month, 1655 :

Thy letter I have received ; those to Oliver Cromwell are both delivered into his hands.

Anxiety as to the fate of their letters was felt at times by many Friends. Writing on 31st of 5 mo. 1660 to George Fox, Margaret Fell gives expression to this in the following terms :

Thine received, wherein thou mentions thou had no letter that week ; which is strange to me, for I did not miss writing any week since I came hither. . . . Let inquiry be made at the post-house what became of the letter. There were some to the children that I would not like to have lost.

G. F. was put on the outside, and it may be that was the cause.

Another instance of this anxiety is found in a letter from Robert Barclay to Sarah Fell, 27th of 8 mo. 1678 :

Some days ago I received both thy letters by William Taylor. I return thee this chiefly to try an experiment whether letters put into the post-office at Edinburgh will come safely to your hands ; for which end I order this that way, and if it hit [?] let me have by the first post an answer, directing it for me to be left with David Falconer, Merchant, Edinboro I will not enlarge by this because uncertain of its safe conveyance.

A few of the letters sent between 1660 and 1750 have rare and interesting postmarks. The one reproduced is on a

¹ John Higgins acted as carrier between Swarthmore Hall and the town of Lancaster, and made many journeys across the sands, chiefly conveying letters to and fro. (*Swarthmore Account Book*, p. 513.)



These
 For Gerard Roberts Wine Copier
 at ye signe of ye flower de laur
 in Thomas Chubbale, for George
 Fox, or Edward Burrow, n^e East
 London 2



letter of 1661 from John Philly to George Fox and Edward Burrough, Dover, 18.vii.(Sept.)1661. It had not been recorded in books on English postmarks prior to its discovery among the Swarthmore letters.¹ The reference to the Round House suggests that the post office was on the premises of an old Guard House for the detention of prisoners. We know that the Kent office was moved to another locality after the Great Fire of 1666.

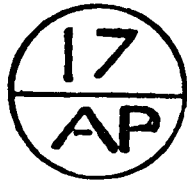
In the year 1680 a certain William Dockwra introduced a Penny Post into London. He undertook to deliver letters and small parcels within a certain radius for a penny and set up a number of receiving houses. As many as six to eight deliveries a day were organized for the City proper. James, Duke of York, watched the progress of this post until its success was assured and then asserted the rights of the Crown in an action against Dockwra in the High Court. Dockwra was deprived of his control but the system he had organized was continued. That the benefits conferred by this post were appreciated by Friends we have ample evidence in the early records of Meetings of Friends in London. In one of his letters William Penn recommends the London Penny Post to his correspondent. In the minutes of the Six Weeks Meeting 4th of 9th, 1712, the following passage occurs :

Thos. Hutson is desired to give notice to ye fds the Q.M. hath appointed by penny post letters two days before advt time of meeting above.

Examples of the triangular "Dockwra" and the "London Penny Post Paid" marks are given below, also an illustration of the first postmark, introduced by Henry Bishop in 1660.



Dockwra Stamp, 1680.



Bishop Postmark, 1660.



London Penny Post, 1683-1794.

The principle of prepayment of a letter was a novel one at this time. Most of the letters sent through the General

¹ Sw. MSS. iv, 189.

Post were paid for by the recipient on delivery. This meant that the post boys had to take bills with them on their rounds and collect the amounts shown. For a letter to go at the lowest rate it had to consist of a single sheet. The envelope only came into general use with the introduction of uniform penny post in 1840. Most letters were sealed with wax or a wafer. The paper was hand-made and samples that have come down to us in the Swarthmore and other collections are as firm and strong to-day as when they were manufactured. This is more than can be said for much of our machine-made paper used for books and letters in the last and present century.

SAMUEL GRAVESON.