

Records from Cirencester

Fettiplace and Bellers

IT would appear to be of more importance than is perhaps generally recognized that the local records of our oldest meeting houses should be carefully examined once or twice in every generation. For all the time fresh material is turning up in the larger world of Friends, and books are being published, which may bring into a quite new importance certain old papers and letters which have lain for centuries in their meeting house chests and strong rooms.

An example illustrative of this occurred at Cirencester, where the papers were last examined fully about 1910. For several years of his life John Bellers, the well-known economist, was a member of this meeting. And the recent interesting study by Ruth Fry led the present writer to see whether further items of value might not be found locally. In particular we noted the statement that the only letter believed to exist in Bellers' own handwriting was in the British Museum. For only the week before reading this, we had found, in a bundle of faded old papers, a note bearing his very clear signature.

This letter from the Cirencester chest, which has now been given by Gloucester and Nailsworth Monthly Meeting to the Library at Friends House, deals merely with the administration of money left by the Fettiplace family for poor Friends of the district. It cannot obviously, therefore, claim a place in importance alongside the intimate epistle from Bellers to Sir Hans Sloane, his fellow-member of the Royal Society, which is in the British Museum. But we have at least secured for Friends House an autograph letter of John Bellers, in what is an unusually accomplished hand, even for educated people of that century. The recipient, Daniel Bowly, was a Quaker citizen of Cirencester whose family appear through the seventeen-hundreds as the leading wool-staplers, maltsters, and bankers of the town.

London
the 24.6 mo. 717

Frd Dan^l Bowley

I suppose John Lewes hath Informed you that I had paid him the Fifty pound, which my Sister Fettiplace Left for the use of the Poor, and that I approved of the proposal made in the Letter sent to me by thee and others of your being Security for the money, & then you may Imploy it as you think Fitt only 5 p Cent a year must be paid for it, to the use of the Poor ;

I did Propose to John Lewes that Isaac Trewland being a Member of the Meeting & the Ablest man belonging to it, (Except thyself) should be One to Signe the Bond, And that all the mony given by my Father Fettiplace and Brother Church (Except the 20^l lost by D. Harding) be aded to it in One Bond ;

The Condition of it should be to secure the Princi-
pall whole & the Intrest of it, should goe among the
Poor Friends of Cisister,

I propose the Bond should be made upon the above
condition to me and my Son Ingram or John Frame &
which of them two is not put into the Bond, should
have the Keeping of the bond, I am indiffrent which
of them two have the keeping of the Bond

I Rest Thy Lov: Friend

John Bellers

The reference to “my Father Fettiplace” introduces an interesting early Quaker personality about whom little has been known. And here emphasis may be laid on the possibility of purely local research at times proving of interest to the Society at large. For it is not in the archives at Friends House that we find details about this somewhat spectacular Giles Fettiplace, Lord of the Manor of Coln St. Aldwyn, who drove to Cirencester meeting in his coach drawn by six horses. It is rather in the records of his own county that we gain information about his ancestors, and the influential position which his family was still occupying when John Bellers married into it in 1686. Buried away in the journals of our county Archæological societies, and the

Local History collections of our county Libraries, there are probably many items of interest about early Friends which may well not be known elsewhere. We have, additionally, in our local Probate Offices, the wills of most of the leading early Quakers of the district, and this is a channel not yet widely explored, which may lead to material of considerable value.

The records of Gloucestershire show that Giles Fettiplace came from a leading county family which had for generations owned large manorial estates near Cirencester. His grandfather, Sir Giles Fettiplace, appeared in 1622 on a commission of enquiry about a land dispute, and it is significant that his fellow-commissioners—Sir William Guise and Sir Thomas Estcourt—were among the most influential knights in the whole county. It was not at all usual for a scion of such a house to become a Quaker, and the impression made in the Cirencester neighbourhood must have been immense.

The date when Giles Fettiplace joined the Society is not yet known but it cannot have been before 1673. This is the date on the old lintel of the Cirencester meeting house, and some pages still exist from the original account book headed: "An acc. of what Friends do subscribe towards ye building of an house." These pages which contain names as well known as that of John Roberts of Siddington, have no contribution from Giles Fettiplace, though after he became a Quaker, he headed munificently every Cirencester subscription list; paying five pounds where the local Quaker merchants pay one, and the rank and file of humbler Friends their shillings, and even their pence.

In 1673, moreover, Fettiplace, as Patron of the living of Coln St. Aldwyn, appointed a certain Richard Hunt as parish priest. One would imagine that this fact alone would conclusively place his membership in the Society at a later date. But an extremely interesting fact which Ruth Fry notes in her book, and which our local Gloucestershire records verify, is that John Bellers, to whom the patronage of the living descended after the death of his father-in-law, actually appointed the next parish priest himself, Quaker though he was. This was in 1703, and it is surely the only case known of such a proceeding. Yet the Gloucestershire Monthly and Quarterly Meeting Minutes of that year, so full of admonitions to those who, "going disorderly in marriage",

have submitted to the usual ceremony by their parish priest, are completely silent on the "heresy" of a leading local Friend appointing the priest.

By the sixteen-nineties, however, Giles Fettiplace was a well-established Quaker, and it is from a collection of letters now in the Bodleian Library that one can realize most vividly the full influence which he must have had on his generation of local Friends. The letters concern the election in Cirencester in 1695, when one of the candidates for Parliament was Henry Ireton, only son of the famous regicide. He was evidently only able to make flying visits to his constituency, and the letters show him as "in ye Camp at Namur" and with the army at Breda. Meanwhile friends are working for him at Cirencester, and they write to acquaint a supporter with Ireton's probable chances. "The Quakers are twenty Voyces," says one informant, "but they are resolved not to poll at all. Yet we found from one who is a considerable shop-keeper . . . that if they polled for any it should be for Mr. Ireton. We were informed that there is one Mr. Fettiplace, a Quaker, who has a very considerable estate, who lives twelve miles from hence at Coln Allens, who could very much influence the Quakers. . . . I went over to him on Tuesday last, but could prevail with him to do no more than what he promised Mr. Ireton (who was with him when he was in ye Country), viz. to engage them not to be against him. . . ." And after further information on other subjects, the election agent returns again to the subject of the Quakers, convinced that the "twenty Voyces" might be secured with a little effort. "Mr. Fettiplace is related to Mr. Ireton's Lady," he adds as a postscript to his letter, "I believe if Mr. Ireton did apply to him it might be well, for he can engage the Quaker to vote if he will."

It would be interesting to collect material from other parts of England to show how soon the early Friends began to take an active part in Parliamentary elections. Here in Cirencester in 1695, they are evidently on the border-line. The days of the persecutions are over when this same "considerable shopkeeper", whom the election agent canvassed, had seen his shop broken into and despoiled. They are fast becoming leading merchants and tradesmen, whose votes are sought. The uncertainty as to whether

they would abstain from voting altogether, or go "all out" for the man they felt the best, is well shown through the letters, and it is a pity that no further records are available to indicate which course was finally taken, and whether Fettiplace did "engage the Quaker" to vote after all. Ireton was not successful in this particular election, though he gained the seat in a later contest.

RUTH G. BURTT