

Records from Nailsworth

THE old established meeting of Nailsworth in Gloucestershire is fortunate in having a seventeenth century meeting house of Cotswold stone and tile which has been altered hardly at all from the early days of its building. It contains, moreover, several pieces of the original furniture, the forms and table shown in Estella Canziani's drawing of the interior being contemporary with the meeting house.¹ Of special interest is the old oak chest which has housed the books through the centuries. "Friends are of Opinion it will be more proper to keep ye Register Book in ye Coffe," states an early Minute, "and the Book being here bro^t is now Put Therein."

The meeting is fortunate also in having a complete set of records of its early life, bound in their original leather and in very good condition. From 1670 dates "Ye Booke belonginge to the frends of the quarterly meeting within the County of Glocester,"—Nailsworth for many years being the leading "particular meeting"; and from 1701 an account book of extreme detail supplements the information. From these two books it is possible to form a very complete picture of the working of this little community of west country Friends in the first fifty years after their establishment, as they endeavour to follow out in actual practice the Advices written by Fox in 1669 and carefully copied on to the front page of their Minute Book the next year. "Friends' fellowship must be in the spirit, And all friends must know one another in the spirit and power of God." . . .²

The group was to pass through a considerable amount of persecution in the early years, and much of their business from 1670-1685 deals with the collection of "sufferings" to send to London, and the "supplying of the necessities of our deare friends who are prisoners for the blessed truth, and the discharge of their room rent in ye prison." In 1683 "it is agreed that ye gaoler in Gloucester Castle should be given 1 pound for his kindness to friends." At practically every Assize, two Friends were appointed to lay the sufferings of their brethren before the Justices, and in 1684 both these Friends were women. They were not content, moreover,

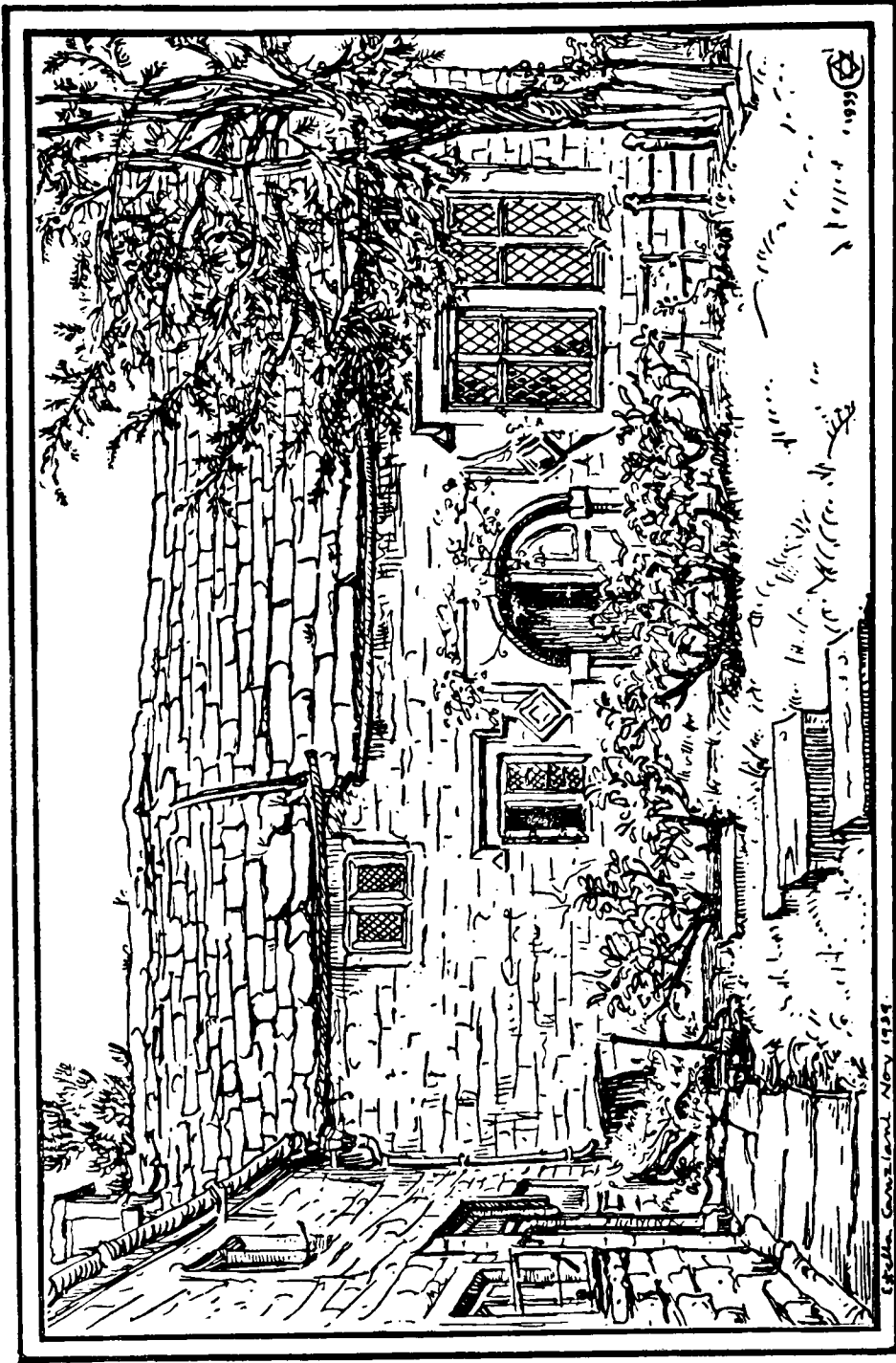
¹ See frontispiece.

² Second Period of Quakerism, p. 256.

with the mere spoken appeal. "The Cry of Oppression and Cruelty . . . being a Paper directed to the Judges of the late Assize in Gloucester" (1676), boldly states: "We do believe it is not to the King's mind that we should be ruined and destroyed, who are his Peaceable subjects and desire his good."

In 1686 comes a welcome intermission of sufferings, and the Minute "Agreed that an Adresse be drawne and assigned to ye King to acknowledge his kindness in stopping our persecutors from their further persecuting of friends." Difficulties arise again, however, with regard to taking the oath, and a Quarterly Meeting held at Nailsworth in 1692 approves that "letters be writt to the parliament men, to be assistant to friends in the bill that is drawne up to take off that law which would force friends to take an oath. The letter to the knights of the shire to be signed by Giles fettiplace, Thos. Sturdge, and Richard Smith on behalf of the county." The choice of the signatories to this letter perhaps shows that Friends were developing a certain worldly wisdom. Giles Fettiplace, the father-in-law of John Bellers, was the only Quaker in the county of the rank from which the knights of the shire themselves were drawn. Thomas Sturge was a leading professional man from the Olveston district, and Richard Smith represented the still important body of master clothiers. It was from him that George Fox in 1678 had purchased some scarlet cloth for Margaret Fell. "I did buy as much as would make thee a mantle . . ." his letter ran, "I had it of Richard Smith of Nailsworth and it is fine." (*Second Period of Quakerism*, p. 519, note.)

"And if there happen to be any difference between friends and friends," wrote Fox in his 13th Advice, "lett half a dozen friends be ordered to put a speedy end thereunto" . . . and it is an interesting study to trace through the Minutes just how these early difficulties were met. Kindliness seems always apparent, but there is invariably firmness alongside. "Whereas a controversie was laid before friends between Thos. Kite the father, and Thos Kite the son," states a Minute of 1683, "it hath been the judgment of friends that Thos. Kite Jun^r. should be left to do with his father according to the freedome of him ye said Thos. Kite the son: but notwithstanding it is ye expectation of friends that in his freedome he will do by his father like a Christian,



NAILSWORTH MEETING HOUSE
(From the drawing by Estella Conziani, by kind permission of the artist)

and so ye meeting will expect an account thereof at the next quarterly meeting." At times this firmness becomes quite dictatorial. Five Friends appointed in 1692 to settle a land dispute "give Judgment" that one of the parties "should have her life in the land." The re-opening of a settled controversy was not allowed. "It is ye Judgment of this meeting that ye said Arbitration shall be a finall End betwixt them," is the verdict in 1694, when such an attempt had been made.

When a difficulty arose in Gloucester meeting in 1700, "Concerning some speakeinge in meetings out of unity," as many as fourteen Friends were chosen to deal with the affair, and their realization that discussion among local members could only prolong the matter is shown by their "hearty desire and advice that all differances betwene them may be Rehearsed no more." At times those attempting to pour oil upon the troubled waters show a modest caution in stating the result. In 1706, "the Friends appoynted Last meeting to Endeavour to reconcile some differances in Cheltnam, report that they accordingly used their Endeavour and left things in a good way of accomadation and likely to doe prety well." On very rare occasions differences were settled *in camera*, for a Minute of 1709 decrees "That some friends should be Chosen to discourse of Some Things being not thought fitt that all the meeting should be made privie to it . . ."

A strong line is taken when any conform to the world in the matter of paying tithes. "It's the sense of this meeting (1697), that Benjamin Power ought not to impose his testimony on friends till the gives satisfaction Concerning his paying Tythes." Even more frequent are the reprimands for "Disorderly taking a wife" who was not of the Society. In 1699, "this meeting is acquainted that John Engly of Gloster meeting did sum time since disorderly take a wife, and the monthly meeting is to show him the Evill thereof and also those that encouraged him therein. . . . This meeting expects that Daniel Dobings and his wife who Countinanced John Engly disorderly taking a wife, shall Cleare the truth of the same by a few lines under their hands" . . . and the episode closes by an actual written apology in the book of the Quarterly Meeting, "I Daniell Dobings declare that as to what I Counseled John Engly in

His Disorderly taking his wife I am sorry for what was done and shall take more care for the future." From a later period come reproofs to Friends who buy and sell smuggled tea. In 1723, " We Rec^d an Epistle from London Yearly Meeting against Running of Goods and defrauding ye King of any of his Custom Duties or Excise." This evidently set local meetings enquiring, for in 1725 appears the entry : " Having examined Stephen Jeffery concerning his Buying and Vending of Runn Tea, we doe report that he acknowledges himself to have erred and promises never to doe the like againe."

That Fox's instructions as to a " speedy ending " of differences was sometimes literally carried out is well shown by a case in Gloucester in 1726/7. " Being Informed of a difference between ye Widdo Humphris and Thos. Monington, this meeting doth appoint (five Friends) . . . to meet at Ye Crown and Septre in Gloster at ye 6th hour this evening." The Quarterly Meeting then adjourned till next day and the first minute of the following morning states : " The friends appoynted Met accordingly and they have drawn up a paper and Delivered it to ye Widdo Humphris as Followeth :

Respected Friend

Elizabeth Humphris : We the committee of the quarterly meeting this day held at this Citty, appoynted to hear a difference betwixt Thos. Monington and thyself Relateing to ye Bounds of Certaine Tenements . . . having heard thy Son on thy part and Thos. Monington for himself, are fully persuaded in our Judgements and it is our oppinion that thou hast already of him as much as thou Bought which with Salutation of Love unto thee we Concludes Thy Loving Friends . . . "

Far different, however, was the procedure in more serious matters such as papers or testimonies being " given against " those who departed from the Truth. In such cases it seemed that no time was too long to weigh up, and consider, and to interview the delinquent. As much as fifteen months elapsed in 1683-4 from the first hint of a difficulty between Cheltenham Friends and a certain Jacob Daves, and the final Minute " That a testimony should be given against

the spirit of Jacob Daves who separates from the spirit of Truth and is following the imaginations of his owne brayne."

A fact which emerges from the records is the breadth of the sympathies of Friends in early days. In 1679, Gloucestershire, in common with most other counties, collected sums towards the £800 sent out for the ransom of the Friends who were captive in Algiers. In 1685, they in their turn receive £14 as their share of the money given by "our deare friends in the kingdom of Ireland towards the relief of suffering friends in England." Individual cases of need aroused particular sympathy. "Ye sufering condition of George Embry of Southampton who lately suffered a great loss by fire" led to as large a sum as £45 13s. 7d. being collected in 1672. It was not only Friends who were the recipients of the sums collected. In 1703, £1 10s. "is given to buy bread to give away to the poore Distressed people that are flooded at this time in this Cuntry." Of interest too is the fact that in 1708 Nailsworth apparently took part in the public collections or "briefs" subscribed to by all the parish churches of the day. Sums totalling £2 11s. 9d. were raised for fire losses in Ely, Shadwell, Lisburn and Bewdley, and the whole handed over to the Public Collector, a receipt being given by him to the "meeting of the People Called Quakers att Nailsworth."

"And when you have heard," Fox had written, "that there is more poore belonging to one meeting than to another, lett the rest of ye meetings assist and helpe them." In 1699, Gloucestershire "Rec^d a letter from friends of Worcester concerning John Pace and his wife, being dead, and left a great Charg. of Children behind them, and desires our assistance. It's left to the mo. meeting at Naylesworth to lett them have £5 towards their relief."

"And also widdowes," Fox continued, "if they have many children to putt oute Aprentices . . . lett friends take care to ease them by putting of them forth as may be meet." Alongside the arrangements of Friends for their poor in early days, it is a useful study to place the contemporary records written up by the churchwardens and parish overseers of the same district. One fact which appears is that in the matter of apprenticeship Friends seem more than others to have appreciated the point of view of the young apprentice: and this in days when children were

regarded as having practically no "rights". Minutes such as the following in 1676 show a sound common sense which augurs well for the future bond between master and man. "Friends do approve that James Collins of Luckinton may goe to Nicholas Wastfeild on tryall and if they like and approve of Each Other, friends do conclude to add their assistance towards the binding him an apprentice." There is human kindness also in the Minute of 1685 which reads, "Whereas Walter Powell hath taken as an apprentice one Ruth Birch, and shee not being well he hath also undertaken to cure her . . . four pounds is to be paid to the said Walter Powell for the present, and if he goes beyond the sea and shall take with him the said Ruth Birch, then he is to have four pounds more." Far less successful are many cases recorded by the local parish overseers. "To speak with James Gardner, he having beat his apprentice out of doors," is only too typical. Significant, also, is the fact that the parish frequently hands over as little as one pound only with each apprentice. Friends maintain the dignity of the bond by invariably giving five.

In the period of sixty years covered by the Minute book, there is only one instance noted of an unsatisfactory partnership, that of a girl from the Forest of Dean apprenticed to one of the leading Gloucester Friends. In 1699, the Quarterly Meeting notes "a letter from the Widd. Phillips wherein she acuseth a friend of Gloster very seriously abt. abusing her Child which upon Examination proves generally false." Before Friends could adequately "inspect into the acusation" the girl had run away, and the next Minute suggests "That the friends of the Forest monthly meeting should speake with the Widd. Phillips and her daughter Concerning her goeing from her master and her mother seeming to take her part, and that they may give them some Just reproofe for their ill behaviour." When matters had gone thus far, Friends wisely did not insist on the girl returning and the bond being maintained—contrary to the usual practice of the day which so often had unhappy results for the returned apprentice. The final entry "Counsels Henry Engly if he sees convenient to release Mary Phillips his apprentice by Delivering their Indentures."

The actual administration of Friends' funds for poor relief is of considerable interest, for cases can be followed

up in detail over many years in a way rarely possible in the records of the parish, where relief is often both indiscriminate and intermittent. "Luke Smith is to have 1s. 6d.", state the overseers of a parish near Nailsworth, "provided he does not come again for a good while . . . he can have 2s. 6d. more later if he behaves himself to his wife and family." In contrast to such random payments, the policy of the early Friends seems most enlightened. They view each case with sympathetic scrutiny and plan, if possible, for an independent future. This is clearly shown by a Minute of 1671 which concerns a hand-loom weaver of Painswick. "Lent to Walter Humphris 24 pounds for ye redeeming of his Loom and other goods that so he might be put in a beter capacity for maintaining of his family and paying of his debts." That their policy was at times justified is evident by this particular case, where the weaver, after much difficulty in England, departed to Pennsylvania. There he appeared to prosper, and it must have been with deep satisfaction that the meeting which had helped him so constantly over many years recorded in 1701 "a Certain sume of 32 pounds that Walter Humphris Deceased gave to pay his debts here in England."

Simple and personal, then, as are often these local records of the Society, they are yet the material out of which our greater histories have been written. And they link us with a bond, akin to friendship, with these earlier folk who also knew our meetings as their own.

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Periodicals Exchanged

Receipt of the following periodicals in exchange is gratefully acknowledged:—

Bulletin of the Friends Historical Association (Philadelphia).

Quakeriana Notes.

Wesley Historical Society, Proceedings.

Presbyterian Historical Society, Proceedings.

Presbyterian Historical Journal (U.S.A.).

Unitarian Historical Society, Transactions.

Mennonite Quarterly Review.

Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research.