

Bristol Quakers and The Oaths

ALITTLE known aspect of the sufferings of Friends comes to light from a study of the Common Council Proceedings in the Bristol City Archives.

Both the charters granted to the city during Charles II's reign required freemen on taking up their burgess-right to take the oath of a burgess. Some Friends did take the oath, but others set up in contempt and were dealt with as the following extract shows :

“Whereas Peter Young¹ Soapeboyler liveing on the Bridge, James Fry² Grocer and Samuell Hollister³ Grocer liveing in Winestreete in this Citty have of late opened their Shopps & Exposed their goods and Weares to Sale, not being a Freeman of the Citty and being often required to take the oaths of alleigeance and the oath of a Freeman, hath hitherto severally refused ” had their shops shut up according to custom, but “in Contempt have againe frequently Opend them,” and the parties being sent for by the Council, and “appeareing & giveing noe Sattisfactory answeere for contempte and Disorder, nor promiseing Obedience & Conformity for time to come, which practise of theirs—being wholly destructive of the privillieges of the Citty and Free Burgesses thereof,” order was given that their shops be “Shutt and Kept downe and Such goods as they Sell, be Seized upon, as Foreigne bought and Sold accordeing to Custome untill they Shall Severally take their said oathes.”⁴

Nearly 18 months later Samuel Hollister's name appears in the burgess roll as “admitted into ye liberties of this Citty for yt he was ye apprentice of Dennis Hollester & hath taken ye Oath of allegeance & paid 4/6,” but whether the others conformed does not appear.

Some years before, in 1669, the matter had been before the Men's Meeting and it asked :

¹ Peter Young, soapmaker, of Bristol Bridge and later of St. Thomas and St. Nicholas parishes, d. 1713.

² James Fry, grocer, of Wine Street and later of Trinity, St. Mary-le-Port, and St. Peter's parishes, d. 1692.

³ Samuel Hollister, grocer, of Wine Street. Nephew of Dennis Hollister, M.P. for Somerset in 1653. Perhaps the same Samuel Hollister who died at Brislington, 1696.

⁴ *Common Council Proceedings*, VI 275, 15 Dec. 1674.

“ That care be taken of such young men that have served out their aprenticeshipp and cannot have their freedom for that they cannot for Conscience sake take an Oath : that their Conditions bee lookt into, and they be Incoradged as opertunity shall present.”¹

Again five years later Friends at the meeting queried why young men out of apprenticeship had not set up.² But it was not until 1696, after the passage of the Affirmation Act, when national affairs bore a different aspect to Charles II's reign, that Bristol Friends succeeded in easing the matter. Friends petitioned the Common Council (in the words of the record) :³

“ Alledging they had right to the Freedom of this City and to be made Burgesses thereof, But not being Free to take the oath which was by custome required of all persons at the time of their Admission into that priviledge, They were deprived of the Benefitts which they had right to by Service, Birth or otherwise.”

Friends

“ prayed, That seeing the Legislative Power had by a Law Indulged Quakers by Enacting that a Solemn Declaracon in some cases should be Equivalent to an Oath, That this House would in like manner Exert their power And order that a certain solemn Declaracon annexed . . . should stand and be in lieuw of the oath taken by others in that case.”

The Common Council referred the Quakers declaration to a committee for consideration,⁴ and after hearing the report the Council ordered that

“ all Quakers having right may be admitted by the Chamberlain according to that form So as their right of Freedom be examined into by the Maior for the time being & two Aldermen who are to Certifie the Persons having mad & subscribed the severall declaracons, and also the Profession of Christian faith Directed by the Act exempting Protestant Dissenters from the Penalties of Certein Laws To be made & subscribed by Dissenters who scruple the taking any oath.”

The form of declaration which Friends were to make in the presence of the Chamberlain read :

“ I A.B. in the presence of Almighty God the witnes of the Truth of what I say Doe promise to be good & true unto King William the Third and to his heires & Successors And to the Leiftenant the Mayor of this Citty of Bristoll and to the Ministers of the same in all causes reasonable to be Obediant and Assistant ”, then follow the more

¹ Bristol Two-weeks' meeting minutes. Vol. 1, p. 112, 29 Sept. 1669.

² *Ibid.* 46-46a.

³ Bristol city archives, 04264(8), f. 155b.

⁴ 04264(8), f. 144, 28 Oct. 1696.

particular promises to keep the peace, not to cover foreign goods and so forth. "Which Solemn Declaracon," the record states, "is taken to be sufficient security for their being Faithfull to what they do or shall Stipulate and promise therein."¹

When these matters were before the Council, Friends at their business meetings also had the procedure up for consideration to watch progress. The Monthly Meeting of Ministers and Elders feared that the city officers might be imposed upon by persons, not Friends, but having a grudge against the government, claiming this legal privilege to avoid taking the oath of loyalty to the House of Orange. The meeting

"thot meet yt our young Men, yt goe the Majestrates, to be made free Men of the Citty, may have some certificate from some known freinde, or freinds . . . how far they May own sayd person, or desire he may be admitted to the benifitt of the Law as such."²

This proposal does not appear to have been adopted,³ but the Men's Meeting was active in forwarding the procedure approved by the city council. One minute directs certain weighty Friends

"to provide what Gratuety they Intend to the officers servicable to them in the procuring the ease to the young men friends that are to be made burgises & freemen of the City & also to prepare the Chamberlane not to give obstruction or delay therein."⁴

Henceforth, with procedure fixed, matters doubtless went smoothly and no more records are found in the Council Proceedings. Only when the freedom could not be claimed as of right did people petition for the privilege, and it is to this cause that the following record is due :

"The Peticon of Gregory Powell⁵ Silkweaver, a known Quaker, for Freedom of this City having been Referred to a Committee, who have now Reported that it is their Opinion that he may be thereto admitted on payment of Fifty shillings for a Fine, This House doth concurr with the said Committee. . . And Mr. Chamberlain is hereby Ordered upon receipt of that Fine to administer to him the

¹ 04264(8), f. 156.

² Friars M. H. Records, vol. 96, p. 54, 24 Nov. 1697.

³ It is interesting to note that a similar proposal had been dropped from the Lords Affirmation Bill in 1693.

⁴ Bristol Two-weeks' meeting minutes. Vol. 2, p. 144, 22 Nov. 1697.

⁵ Gregory Powell, silkweaver, of St. Thomas and later of Redcliff parish, d. 1722. Named in James II's mandate to receive the freedom of the city of Bristol. Active worker in Friends' Workhouse.

said Gregory Powell the Declaracon appointed to be taken by Quakers instead of the oath of a Burgess."¹

Previous record of an attempt to obtain the freedom of the city without the oath comes from James II's reign, and is paralleled by the Norwich attempt.² A royal mandate required the mayor, aldermen and corporation of Bristol to make sixty-five³ named persons freemen "without administering unto them any Oath or Oaths whatsoever, with which wee are graciously pleased to dispence in that beehalfe."⁴ The mandate is dated April 29, 1688. It was not read in the Common Council until October 11, and consideration was then deferred. Nothing more is heard of the proposal. In the meantime, however, the burgess roll had the names of a few⁵ of the persons mentioned entered upon it, some with no mention of them having taken the oath.

Not many months before, the West had been aflame with the Monmouth rebellion, and, although Bristol escaped both the fighting and the difficulties of Somerset Friends with backsliders in their midst, the costs of quartering and entertaining royal troops and emergency defences bore heavily on the city purse. In turning round for means to defray this additional expenditure and finding that a rate could not legally be levied, the town clerk is credited with the idea of electing Friends, and others who could not take an oath, to the Council in order to fine them for refusing to take the oaths for this service to the city. Naturally this was confined to Friends who were freemen, probably mostly those who had been freemen before joining Friends.

The first to be elected was Thomas Speed. In the Common Council Minutes for September 8, 1685 appears the following entry:⁶

"And there being a Member wanting in the Common Councill Mr. Thomas Speed being a Free Burgess of this Citty this house hath elected him. And doth forthwith require him to appeare before the Mayor and Aldermen and to take the Oath of a Common Councill

¹ 04264(8), ff. 187-188, 13 Dec. 1699.

² At Norwich, Friends petitioned the king that they might become freemen, and instructions were issued accordingly, but the corporation resisted, with apparent success.

³ The great majority, possibly all, Friends.

⁴ 04264(8), f. 21.

⁵ 11 June 1688: Thomas Goldney; 22 June: Joseph Vigor; 18 Aug.: Simon Clement; 22 Sep.: Joseph Kippon; 24 Sep.: William Rowch.

⁶ 04264(7), f. 221.

man In Obedience to the Oath he took when he was admitted a Burgess To which The house doth expect his Speedy answer That his Maiestys service may not be neglected in this City." A week later the Council " being this day moved on behalf of Mr. Thomas Speed Merchant lately elected a Member of the Common Councill who desired That he might be discharged therefrom," decided that on payment of £200 to the Chamberlain, " He shalbe dismissed from being a Member of the said Common Councill And shall not at any time hereafter Without his owne free consent be called upon or elected to beare any of the offices of Maior Alderman Sheriff or Member of the Common Councill."

Payment was promised by Michaelmas and Speed was discharged.

Other prominent Friends were elected in the following months and among them Thomas Goldney (fined £200), Thomas Jordan¹ (fined £100), James Freeman,² Thomas Harris,³ Charles Jones junior⁴ (fined £50 each), and John Love.⁵ The latter declared the " great losses he has lately susteyn'd " and was fined £100. Thomas Callowhill was nominated at the same council meeting as Thomas Speed, but was not finally elected until November 6, 1686.⁶ His fine was " carried at Two Hundred Poundes, accordingly he gave his Bond to pay the Chamberlain ye said £200 at Paulstide⁷ next." It might appear that Callowhill had put the matter to legal issue, for in March 1687 the sum was still outstanding and the Council, being

" mou'd that Mr. Callowhills fine of £200 be mittigated for which he has given Bond . . . order'd that upon his payment of the £150 within these three dayes, and all the charges that has bene layd out in suit ; this his Bond be deliuer'd up ; and he discharg'd from a member of the Common Councill."⁸

Among those nominated for office, but not in fact elected,

¹ Thomas Jordan, linendraper, d. 1701.

² James Freeman, apothecary, of Wine Street, later of Broad Street, St. John's parish. Guardian for Trinity ward in the Bristol Corporation of the Poor, 1696.

³ Thomas Harris, apothecary, of Mary-le-Port Street, later of St. Philip's parish, d. 1698. Thomas Harris married, 1683, Phoebe, daughter of Dennis Hollister.

⁴ Charles Jones, jr., merchant, of the Castle, d. 1701. He affirmed that he was not worth £2000. There is a note in *Short Journal*.

⁵ John Love, grocer, of St. Peter's parish, later of St. James's parish, d. 1696. Treasurer for Bristol Friends, 1679-86.

⁶ 04264(7), f. 226.

⁷ The winter fair in Bristol, beginning on St. Paul's day, Jan. 25.

⁸ 04264(7), f. 232.

were Nathaniel Day,¹ Erasmus Dole,² Charles Harford,³ Charles Jones senior and William Rogers. The matter appears to have been brought to the notice of the government before Barbara Blagdon's letter to the king (dated Bristol September 11 [1686])⁴, with unknown success, but little was done in the matter after that summer.

These little known incidents do not appear in Besse's *Sufferings* since they were not concerned with Friends' meeting together; but they provide good illustration of the temper of city authorities and the difficult paths into which Friends' testimony against oaths could lead them before the era of toleration.

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¹ Nathaniel Day, hosier, of Bristol Bridge, later of Castle Precincts, d. 1691.

² Erasmus Dole, pewterer, of St. Thomas's parish, later of Temple Street, and Clifton, d. 1717. Freeman of the city, 1660.

³ Charles Harford, soapmaker and merchant, of St. Peter's parish, later of St. Philip's parish. b. 1631, d. 1709. Member of the Bristol Corporation of the Poor, and Treasurer for one year. Member of the Society for the Reformation of Manners, 1700.

⁴ Friends House. Portfolio I, 44.

Additions to the Library

A FRANCIS BUGG TRACT

THE Library has recently purchased a single sheet folio item by Francis Bugg. It is headed "An Abstract of the Quakers present Principles, Humbly laid before the Honourable, the House of Commons, Assembled in Parliament." London, Printed for the Author, and Sold (with others of his Books) at the Kings-head, Crown, and Green-dragon, in St. Paul's Church-Yard. 1709. (Joseph Smith: *Catalogue of Friends' Books*. I, 344.)

The principles are listed under ten heads, followed by three proofs. The author says he believes some Quakers, if "convinced of the errors of their Teachers would forsake them. And I knowing of no better Method, than an Examination by the Government, have, once more (as in Duty bound) endeavoured to unfold their Principles by this short Abstract, Submitting the Premises to Your Pious Consideration. Who am Your most Humble and most Obedient Servant, Francis Bugg."