

Bristol Quaker Merchants

Some New Seventeenth Century Evidence

THE latest volume in the series of publications of the Bristol Record Society, entitled *Records relating to the Society of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol in the Seventeenth Century*¹, is edited by Patrick McGrath of the University of Bristol, and brings to light new evidence concerning the activities of some of the more eminent Bristol Friends who were members of the Merchants' Society. An examination of this evidence and illustration how it fits in with information already obtained from other sources, has an interest outside that of purely local history, and may provide a picture which, in broad outline but with significant local variation, may be repeated for all the communities of Friends in seaport towns.

Among Bristol Friends the number of merchants was probably small, but they were among the most prominent members and took active parts in the meetings for business. From a study of the Friends' records it appears that about 10 per cent of heads of families describe themselves as merchants, compared with percentages of 6 in the learned professions (legal, educational, medical), 20 in other branches of commerce and consumption goods (7 grocers), 20 in the mechanic trades (shipwrights, masons, smiths, coopers and the like), and nearly 40 per cent in the weaving, clothing and allied trades. It was in this last group that unemployment was heaviest at the end of the century, and many were the weavers who left Bristol to seek a new life across the Atlantic when the way to Pennsylvania opened.

In such a community and in the second port of the kingdom, it was natural for merchants to play a leading role, and it is always interesting to come across Friends, known from one aspect of their activity, in a new sphere. George Bishop, Charles Jones, William Rogers, Thomas Speed and William Yeamans are among the Merchant Venturers who can be established as Friends, and there are others, like John

¹ Bristol Record Society. Publications, vol. xvii. For 1951. (Pp. lvi, 276. 27s. 6d. to non-members.)

Haggatt, Peter Hiley, Francis Rogers and John Speed, who at one time or other were closely connected, who make their appearance in the list of members printed in this new volume from the Book of Charters.¹

Thomas Speed was admitted member of the Society,
23 October, 1647

for Five Poundes Fine. Wherevpon the said Thomas Speed is admitted a Burgesse of this Society for Five powndes Fine. And for that hee married the late wife of Mr. Roberte Yeamans deceased, being in his life tyme a Burgesse of this Society, And for that his being a free Burgesse of this Society will and is like to tende to the good and benefit of the children of the said Robert Yeamans deceased.²

Five years later, 20 January, 1651, George Bishop was admitted,

the Master and Company takeing into consideracion the many favours and curtesies done vnto this Company by Mr. George Bishoppe at London, Did admitt the said Mr. George Bishoppe a free Burgesse of this Society, Provided that he shall not at any tyme hereafter be privileged to make any sonne or servante of his a free Burgesse of this Society, by vertue of this his admission otherwise then according to the Books of Orders formerly made by this Society.³

Bishop's marriage into the Cann family and the opportunities which his official position at Whitehall in the early republican government gave him to protect the interests of his neighbours in Bristol, doubtless earned him the gratitude of the Merchant Venturers, however much his political outlook differed from their mainly royalist sympathies.

OVERSEAS TRADE

It was natural that Bristol Friends should be closely concerned in overseas trade. Bristol merchants were particularly active in the triangular trade with the West Indies and the plantations on the American mainland. A contemporary witness records of Bristol

that all men that are dealers, even in shop trades, launch into adventures by sea, chiefly to the West India plantations and Spain. A poor

¹ Bristol Record Society, xvii, 29-31. Notes are not provided for Friends who are named in *The Journal of George Fox*, Cambridge edition, 1911, or *The Short and Itinerary Journals*, 1925. Peter Hiley (d. 1675), of Broad Weir, a councillor. His wife, Joan, *née* Yeaman (d. 1687) was an active woman Friend. John Speed (d. 1675), m. Bathsheba (Bethshua, Berthna) Yeaman in 1657; sufferer under Conventicle Act persecution (1664).

² Bristol Record Society, xvii 44 (Hall Book I, 105).

³ Bristol Record Society, xvii 46 (Hall Book I, 187). The entry is signed, Geo: Bishope.

shopkeeper that sells candles will have a bale of stockings, or a piece of stuff, for Nevis, or Virginia, &c.¹

Exeter Friends were probably correct when they wrote in 1700 to the effect that in most ships going to Pennsylvania “(if not [in] all) one Friend or other of Bristol is Concerned”.²

Although it is usual for our thoughts in this connection to turn westward, it should not be forgotten that Bristol had many trading connections in south-west Europe and the Mediterranean, inherited from the slowly expanding trade of the later Middle Ages when the King of England still had continental possessions. Entries taken at random for the new Bristol Record Society volume from the Wharfage Books on a typical day in 1654, show Charles Jones importing pipes of oil from Lisbon in the *Golden Lion*, and Thomas Speed “I Chest I fetch of suger” in the same ship.³

Constant mention of Irish trade in Bristol annals shows how close the connections were between the Severn seaboard ports and the south of Ireland. In 1698 James Logan, for a time schoolmaster in his father’s room at the Friars Meeting House, had begun trading with Dublin, but he gave it all up to go with William Penn to America. Friends travelling in the ministry to Ireland, and Friends from the south of Ireland coming over to London Yearly Meeting disembarked at Bristol from Cork and Waterford. Poor Friends too, travelling to Ireland, were helped on occasion by Bristol meeting.

In 1696, “John Camm a poore freinde of Corke, being in need of assistance in his passage homewards” was granted aid, and a fortnight later 10s. or 20s. was put aside for him “the most if he stay long windbound”.⁴

As example of the activity of Bristol Friends in trans-Atlantic trade it must be sufficient to mention one or two instances. John Whiting records that George Coale, one of the Coales of Winterbourne in Gloucestershire,

travelled much beyond Sea into America . . . particularly Jamaica, where he mostly Resided as a Factor to some Bristol Merchants at first, but afterwards a Merchant himself, and had pretty much Substance there.⁵

¹ *The Lives of the Norths.* Ed. Jessopp. Bohn edition, I, 156.

² Exeter Friends’ letter to Bristol, 23.ii.1700. Friars MSS. (C. 1842. C. 17-139.) “Illustrations of Discipline”, p. 171.

³ Bristol Record Society, xvii, 173.

⁴ Bristol Men’s Meeting minutes 14 & 28.vii.1696.

⁵ *Persecution Expos’d* (1715), p. 81.

Thomas Speed was a member of the Corporation of New England,¹ and was member of the Merchant Venturers' committee appointed in 1654 to

ioyne with the Westcountry merchants in their petitions touching the Dutch trading at Barbadoes and other Cariba Islands and Virginia.²

Charles Jones, forty years later, was appointed to a similar committee to consider proposals for the benefit of trade.³

CONVOYS AND EMBARGOES

Difficulties which beset other traders also beset Friends, and their names recur in passages in the records relating to trade restrictions at home and dangers on the high seas. One or two examples alone can be given. During the Dutch wars English command of the narrow seas was very uncertain. Dutch privateers were active, and on one occasion strong complaint was made to the government that they were operating in the English Channel and had plundered the

Industry of Bristol of soap and canvas, embarked at St. Malo on account of Richard March of Bristol.⁴

Convoys in time of war were a source of annoyance to Bristol traders, particularly those who owned the faster vessels. On the voyage out to the plantations, the Bristol ships had to sacrifice their advantage of westerly position and patiently wait the English Channel convoy of the London ships. The speed of the convoy was that of the slowest ship. In April, 1693 Bristol traders petitioned the Privy Council that no Embargo may be laid on their ships in Virginia, but that they be permitted to saile home as soon as they are ready, more especially the ships *Bengall* and *Bristoll Merchant*.⁵

This petition most probably arose from the efforts of a strong committee of the Society of Merchant Venturers

¹ *Acts of the Privy Council. Colonial Series*, I, 308-9; 17th May, 1661.

² Bristol Record Society, xvii, 243 (Hall Book I, 256-57); 7th December, 1654.

³ Bristol Record Society, xvii, 257 (Hall Book III, 59); 14th January, 1696.

⁴ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, 1676-77, 292 (cf. 323). For Richard March (Marsh) (c. 1630-1703/4), merchant, see *Friends' Quarterly Examiner*, 1907, 477-490; *Journal F.H.S.* xxii, 90-92; accused in 1672 of smuggling wine, *Calendar of Treasury Books*, 1669-1672, iii, 1,078, 1,233.

⁵ *Acts of the Privy Council, Colonial Series* ii, 222; 27th April, 1693.

appointed the previous November, of which Charles Jones was a member, directed

to inspect the greivances occasioned by the long imbargoes and other delays in our trade and . . . to seeke redresse therein.¹

These general embargoes on sailings, for fear of pirates or for blockade purposes, were sometimes little short of disastrous, and merchants made great efforts to mitigate their effects. In October, 1690, Edward Martindale petitioned the Privy Council and secured the inclusion of his *Constant Love* (140 tons) in the list of ships to sail to Virginia "as laden with perishable commodities and entered at the Customs before notice was given of the general embargo".² At the same time Michael Pope and Richard Gotley petitioned for the inclusion of the *Virginia Merchant*, then loading in the Thames, in the Bristol list of Virginia sailings, as six of their ships had been in use as transports for the army in Ireland and had been released from that service too late for refit in time to sail for America that year.³ In the following season Richard Gotley was in trouble for sending his ship the *Richard and John* out to Virginia in defiance of the embargo, but he bought his liberty by promising to raise 50 seamen for the King.⁴

As we have seen, Richard Gotley had been concerned in shipping soldiers to Ireland. He had not been paid, and in 1694 he petitioned to be allowed to set off money out of the transport account against the demands of the Customs commissioners. This was granted, and the Treasury ordered the commissioners.

to forbear prosecuting Richard Gotley of Bristol, merchant, for the £855 10s. od. due from him on tobacco bonds . . . it appearing that

¹ 10th November, 1693; Bristol Record Society, xvii, 198 (Hall Book II, 511).

² *Acts of the Privy Council. Colonial Series*, ii, 160; 30th October, 1690. Edward Martindale (d. 1703), merchant, married Margaret Yeamans (the sister of William Yeamans who married Isabel Fell).

³ *Calendar of Treasury Books*, 1689-92, ix, 840, 868; 3rd October, 1690; *Calendar of Treasury Papers*, 1556/7-1696, 137-8.

Michael Pope was not a Friend; he signed a certificate concerning the unhealthy state of Newgate prison when Friends were in prison in 1682 (*Distressed Case*, 30-31); see *Journal F.H.S.*, viii, 99.

Richard Gotley (d. 1705) was a sufferer under the Conventicle Act persecution (1664), but his later activities must have caused Friends some trouble. See *Journal F.H.S.*, x, 42-3.

⁴ *Acts of the Privy Council. Colonial Series*, ii, 169; 1st, 24th March, 1692, 14th April, 1692. He raised 47 men in Bristol.

there is upwards of £3,000 due to him for the service of transport ships in the reducing of Ireland.¹

APPRENTICESHIP TO THE SEA

In one of the earliest minutes of Bristol Men's Meeting, there is mention of two lads "sayd to be now goeing to sea".² Boys were frequently fitted out with clothes, like one in 1693 about to join a ship "for one voyag to the West Indias".³ A year later 30s. more was given for his clothes and necessaries, he "now goeing prentice to Thomas Tandy, Master of the shipp *Warcesters delight*".⁴ These minutes concern the poorer sort of Friends, and it seems probable that seamanship was only chosen as a career in the last resort. Thus, one poor widow appealed to the Men's Meeting on behalf of her son

a Lad of about 14 yeares, she being unable to place him out, desires our Assistants [assistance] to furnish him with Nessesarys he being now to be bound aprentice to the Owners of the shipp *Leopheard*.⁵

Samuel Parsons, son of Thomas Parsons of Portishead and apprenticed at the expense of Bristol Friends, had proved an unruly apprentice and was sent to sea. At the end of one voyage, Friends made arrangements for him to sail again in the *Bristol Merchant* for the next voyage.⁶

That the sea was an asylum for some wilder spirits may have been an advantage for Bristolians wishing to be rid of high-spirited or disorderly youths, but for ship-passengers the case was not so satisfactory. New Jersey Friends wrote to England, asking Friends to warn travellers

yt they be carefull & circomspect in theire passage, for it is well knowne to some of you yt such yt are Employed in sea affares are commonly men of ye wildest sort, and many of them use great dilligence to betray the simple ones.⁷

Conditions on shipboard in the seventeenth century left much to be desired, and Meeting for Sufferings wrote in 1700 to Friends about

great Numbers of Friends crowding together on Ship Board in order to Transport themselves into Foreign parts which, its believed, hath

¹ *Calendar of Treasury Books, 1693-96*, x, 621 (cf. 579); 16th May, 1694.

² Bristol Men's Meeting minutes, 9.vii.1667.

³ Bristol Men's Meeting minutes, 4.vii.1693.

⁴ Bristol Men's Meeting minutes, 21.xi.1694 (21st January, 1695).

⁵ Bristol Men's Meeting minutes, 13.ix.1693.

⁶ Bristol Men's Meeting minutes, 2.v. and 27.vi.1677.

⁷ Burlington M.M. letter to London Yearly Meeting, 17.vii.1680; copy in (Friends House) Bristol MSS. i, 33.

occasioned great Sickness & Mortality to many of them in their Voyages . . .

and that such that are Merchants, Masters of Ships, Owners & Undertakers may prevent as much as in them lyes, the Endangering the healths & lives of passengers by not Suffering their Ships to be soe crowded but that they may be well & conveniently accommodated.¹

The Lancaster case is well-known,² but there is no hint of this sort of trouble in the Bristol records.

EMIGRATION

One aspect of Bristol overseas trade, however, which has received some attention from historians, and which does not reflect credit on the merchants of the time, is connected with transport of persons to the colonies. It has been calculated that between 1654 and 1685 10,000 indentured servants were sent overseas from Bristol, most of them for the American colonies. Much of this was honest traffic and well-conducted, but towards the end of the century the supply began to fail, and kidnapping became common. The danger was present long before Judge Jeffreys set Bristol magistrates by the ears when he charged the mayor and his associates as men-stealers. In 1662 the mayor had petitioned the Privy Council for powers to examine owners and passengers, and to keep records, to prevent desertion, children being spirited away, or apprentices and rogues escaping from the country.³

The fault may not have been all on the side of the Old Country, for, in 1700, Bristol Friends felt it necessary

to write to Friends in Pensilvania . . . to Caution them not to use any Indirect ways or means to Induce people to goe over as servants or passages.⁴

As soon as this was drafted, Bristol Friends had occasion to look to their own good name

There being an odious rumor about this Citty about Kidnapping people to goe beyond the seas, and that one professing truth is much damd in that respect.⁵

John Fallowfield was named in the next Men's Meeting.

¹ Meeting for Sufferings letter, 5.xi.1699 (5th January, 1700); copy in Friars MSS. (C. 1842, F.3-22), "Yearly Meeting minutes and epistles", p. 40.

² See W. Giles Howson, *Lancaster Friends and North America* (1952), pp. [5-6]. Half the passengers died on the voyage, 1699.

³ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, 1661-2, 441; 16th July, 1662.

⁴ Bristol Men's Meeting minutes, 8.ii.1700.

⁵ Bristol Monthly Meeting minutes, 24.ii.1700.

A complaint was brought into this meeting that the reputation of truth Suffers in this city and elsewhere by means of John Fallowfield, who at this time follows an employment of transporting persons to Pensilvania, which is not as he doth manage it reputable:

This meeting therefore desires Richard Sneed, Thomas Callowhill, Charles Jones & Thomas Dickson to go and discourse him from this meeting upon this Subject and to advise him as they shall find cause.¹

In happier vein, we find that in one of the earliest minutes of the Bristol Men's Meeting, assistance was given to Wenlock Christison when he was waiting to sail to America.²

For the Friends who had gone to the New World there was no thought of cutting themselves off from the growing family of Quakerism in the Old World, and ties with Friends on this side of the Atlantic were well maintained. Travelling Friends brought back news across the ocean, and frequent letters told the rest—good and bad.

TROUBLE IN AMERICA

Virginia Friends wrote in 1674 to Bristol to report the "miscarriages" of Edward Beare, who went over in the *Katheren* of Bristol. Trading as a factor, Beare defrauded English merchants and New England Friends. He experienced a sick-bed repentance, and finally committed suicide. Virginia Friends wrote that his actions gave

as good a testymony for truth as Judas did when he brought backe the mony & sayd he had betrayd Jnnocent blood.³

Bristol Friends had heard similar reports before, and inquired into the facts, but they were often hampered by want of information, for

not haveing full & perfect evidence to prove many things reported & yet haveing a sence yt ye name of the Lord was by many factors (reputed friends) dishonoured, we are concerned to give this [general admonition] forth as a publick testimony

and warning against such practices.⁴

This trouble recurred throughout the colonial period. At the end of the seventeenth century, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting wrote of young men arriving there in charge of cargoes, who

¹ Bristol Men's Meeting minutes, 6.iii.1700.

² Bristol Men's Meeting minutes, 20.iii., 3, 17.iv.1667.

³ Letter, dated Nansemond, 25.iv.1674, in Bristol MSS., v, 110; printed *Journal F.H.S.*, xi, 28-31.

⁴ 28.x.1669: copy of Bristol letter to Friends in Virginia and Maryland in Friars MSS. (C. 1842, C. 6-105, p. xlvi).

doe often take Extravagant Courses, Spending their money & Debauching themselves, by Reason of which a Reproach is brought upon ye Truth & ye Friends of it.¹

From the English side, Exeter Friends complained that debtors "go away privately and transport themselves to Pensylvania".

Bristoll being ye meane place from where ships goes to Pensilvania causes many yt are minded to transport themselves to repaire thither.

Exeter Friends asked Bristol meeting if something could not be done to stop such emigrants from slipping out of the country.² Nothing seems to have come out of this, although the suggestion was made that a simple procedure for recovering debts in Pennsylvania would be a good thing.

The bar of the oath to taking up the freedom of the city³ and restrictions on shipping in time of war were not the only difficulties which Friends had to face. In the troubled times soon after the Restoration of Charles II, when dissenters were looked on as potential rebels, the magistrates in Bristol searched the premises of Henry Row, a Quaker ironmonger⁴ and confiscated 18 barrels of gunpowder, returning only 3 barrels for his immediate trade. About six months after this, in October, 1661 when the Fifth Monarchy scare had died down, restrictions on Row's trading were eased. Secretary Nicholas wrote to the mayor that though Henry Row's purchases of powder and shot

be in ye way of his calling, wherein his Majesty doth not meane to disturbe or hinder him, yet considering the Opinions he is of & ye quantityes he is discovered to provide is justly to be suspected; his Majesty thinks fitt you take weekly an account of him of what Powder or Ammunition he takes in or sells out.⁵

¹ Letter of 1699, quoted in Meeting for Sufferings letter, 5.xi.1699 (5th January, 1700); copy in Friars MSS. (C. 1842, F.3-22). "Yearly Meeting minutes and epistles", p. 39.

² 23.ii.1700; Exeter letter in Friars MSS. (C. 1842, C. 17-139). "Letters of discipline", p. 171. See also Bristol Yearly Meeting minute, 30.ii.1700 (C. 1842, E.1-24), p. 49.

³ See *Journal F.H.S.*, xlivi, 72-7.

⁴ Henry Rowe, ironmonger (d. 1698); married Judith Popley (d. 1691); councillor (1653-5); commissioner for militia 26th July, 1659; imprisoned for opening his shop on Christmas Day, 1661; under Friends' censure for miscarriages (1669).

⁵ Secretary Nicholas to Mayor of Bristol, 5th October, 1661; S.P.D., xlivi, 25-6; *Extracts from State Papers (F.H.S.)*, 135; *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic*, 1661-2, 107. For the earlier proceedings, see letter from John Dashfield to Nicholas, 18th April, 1661 (S.P.D., xxxiv, 68; *Extracts from State Papers*, 130).

In another way, industrial enterprise had some risks. The Warden of the London Mint made enquiries of the mayor of Bristol, writing that

there is one Whittwood a Quaker & a pewterrer of Bristoll that hath an engine not unlike that which his Majestie hath for the Coyning of his Mony.

The Warden asked for information to be secured secretly about the machine, to what use it had been put, and how long Whittwood had had it.¹

CONCLUSION

The information given in the Merchant Venturers' records printed by the Bristol Record Society, and the other material in this essay, underline the point that the early converts to Quakerism did not come solely from the poorer classes, but included traders of the like of Dennis Hollister, Thomas Goldney, Charles Harford and Edward Pyott. The latter, when he was arrested with George Fox at St. Ives in 1656, offered to buy a thousand pounds worth of goods from Peter Ceely or to sell him a thousand pounds worth, in order to prove that they were no common vagrants.² There is no denying, however, that increased prosperity among Friends was becoming noticeable with the coming of toleration.

One Friend wrote:

The Lord has given Riches, and made up your Losses both in London and Bristol (especially Bristol) I mean what you have lost by suffering for Truth.³

Friends were never content to have their members idle. When work was not available they established their own Workhouse and set the unemployed weavers to work there. When a man had work he could do, they advised him "to betake himselfe to his trade . . . with dilligence."⁴ William Prynne may have made his ill-conceived charge that the Quaker ministers did "perswade people to desert their lawful calling and imployments, and to embrace an idle monking lasie life"⁵ on the basis of Friends' week-day meetings, or on the activities of the travelling ministers; but before the

¹ Letter of 30th November, 1686, in Bristol City Archives, 04447(2).

² *West Answering the North* (1657), p. 3.

³ A.R., *Tender exhortation* (1700), p. 7-8.

⁴ Bristol Men's Meeting minutes, 21.vi.1693.

⁵ George Whitehead, *Truth tryumphing in a suffering time* (1664), pp. 17-18.

century was out the whole nation knew he was wrong. Rather, the reverse was the case, and concerned Friends were pleading for a little less attendance on the things of this world and more attention to the things of the next.¹

But industry was bringing a reward, and as an example of the "new rich" among Friends who were to make their mark in the eighteenth century we may take Benjamin Coole, a lad from Wiltshire, who married and settled in Bristol in 1689. He was an active Friend and a quick controversialist. His success in trading with America laid the foundation of a good fortune which he used for industrial enterprises at Baptist Mills and elsewhere. George Keith brought this rapid rise to affluence against him in the course of a controversy, but Coole replied

That Reflection on me as if it was, but Lately I left the Loom, being a poor Lad, but am now worth Hundreds shews how hard he . . . is put to it—for were it not that things are at a very low Ebb with him; he would not, surely have wounded me with that Weapon, what Ere he had done; it being so common to Oyster Women, Water-men, and Porters.²

In the fruits of Benjamin Coole's success in commerce applied to the development of industry at Baptist Mills and later in Coalbrookdale, we see the opening of that period of industrial expansion in the succeeding century, for which some Friends were well placed and qualified to act as leaders.

RUSSELL S. MORTIMER

The William and Mary Quarterly for July, 1953 (vol. 10, Third series, no. 3, pp. 403-21) includes "Ye Scheme to Bagge Penne": a forged letter smears Cotton Mather, by Richard Dean Hathaway—a critical examination of a letter first published in 1870, purporting to come from a collection deposited in the collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society. The letter, dated 15th September, 1682 and signed Cotton Mather, reported a "plot" by the Massachusetts authorities to capture the *Welcome* as it approached the American shore, bearing William Penn and his party to Pennsylvania, and to sell the shipload as slaves in the West Indies for rum and sugar. Suitably elaborated, this story was seized upon by newspaper editors to have a malicious laugh at the New Englanders. There seems no doubt that the whole story was a hoax, but the continuing tradition of New England persecutions of religious dissidents, and the attraction of a story against the Puritans, gave it just that salt at the time, and an interest today which can support a 20-page article.

¹ See particularly Richard Vickris, *A salutation of love* (1697).

² *Honest the truest policy* (1700), 88-9.