The Great Fire of London

WHEN Samuel Pepys, a near neighbour of the Penn family at Tower Hill, was awakened by his servant about 3 o'clock on the morning of Sunday, 2nd September, 1666, to be told of a great fire that could be seen in the City, he decided, after looking out of the window, that it was too far away and so returned to bed. Later that morning he realised that this was no ordinary fire, and all that day, and the following days, he was torn between his curiosity to see more of the fire and his anxiety as to the possible damage to his goods, his home and to the Navy Office of which he was Secretary. On the Monday he and Sir William Penn sent some of their possessions down river to Deptford. The narrow congested streets, with bottlenecks at the gates and posterns, where everyone was endeavouring to escape with what goods he could save, added to the confusion.

On the evening of the second day of the fire Pepys and Sir William Penn dug pits in their gardens in which to place their wine; Pepys, remembering his favourite Parmesan cheese, put that in, as well as some of his office papers. Sir William Penn brought workmen from the Dockyard to blow up houses in order to prevent the fire reaching the church of All Hallows by the Tower.

The anxiety of Pepys and Penn, their uncertainties whether or not to remove their goods, their lack of sleep and the difficulty of obtaining food, which Pepys records in his Diary, are typical of the problems of the citizens, among whom were a large number of Quakers.

Friends' Book of Sufferings for the year 1666 has no mention of the Fire. Friends only recorded those Sufferings inflicted on them by the hand of man; a catastrophe which was suffered by all finds no place in Quaker records. They saw in the Fire a Divine Judgment on the Nation that had been their persecutors. Friends were not alone in this, and each sect saw the Fire as a judgment on their own particular enemies. Catholics regarded it as a punishment for heresy; many people believed that the Catholics were responsible for starting the fire, and at one time The Monument had an

inscription to this effect. Anglicans laid the blame on the Schisms, and the Dissenters said it was because of the pride of the Clergy; some thought it was for the murder of the late King, others a judgment on the licentiousness of the Court. Most Englishmen were convinced that it was the work of French or Dutch secret agents.

Solomon Eccles, a Southwark Quaker, had been moved to pass, almost naked, through Bartholomew Fair (24th August) bearing upon his head a pan full of fire and brimstone, warning the pleasure-loving city of God's impending judgment. Another Quaker, a few days before the fire broke out, had stopped the King's coach as it was leaving Whitehall, in order to present a petition as to the Sufferings of Friends in Reading. A footman who endeavoured to prevent him mounting the step, was told by the King to desist and to allow the Petitioner to approach; the King also told the footman to return the Quaker's hat; the Friend then informed the King that unless he set Friends at liberty the Lord would bring a judgment of sword and fire upon him.

The most singularly correct prophecy was made by Humphrey Smith, who died in Winchester Gaol in 1662, four years before the Great Fire. In *A Vision which I saw concerning London*, he wrote:

> As for the City herself and her suburbs and all that belong to her, a fire was kindled therein, but she knew not how, even in all her goodly places, and the kindling of it was in the foundation of all her buildings and there was none that could quench it, and the burning thereof was exceedingly great, and it burned inward in a hidden manner which cannot be described. All the tall buildings fell and it consumed all the costly things therein, and the fire searched out all the hidden places, and burnt most of the secret places, and there were parts of broken down walls which the fire continued burning against, and the vision thereof remained in me as a thing that was shewn me of the Lord.

Some of the more responsible Friends tried to curb the exuberance of their prophetic brethren. "That morning the fire broke out," wrote George Whitehead:

> some of us were at Gerard Roberts' House in Thomas Apostle's where Thomas Ibbot met us and told us, he must go to the King with a message to warn him to release our Friends out of Prisons or else the Decree of the Lord would be sealed against him in three days time to his destruction and overthrow. Upon which I was afraid he would be too forward and give occasion against

> Friends and cause that to reproach Truth and them. I earnestly charged him not to limit a time; if he had a warning to give the King that he would set no time of the King's death or end or that might be so taken or constructed as a prophesy thereof for he might cause Truth to suffer if he did.

Many Friends were imprisoned in Newgate gaol which was destroyed by the Fire. One Friend records that he carried his bed out on his back when the prison was burnt.

Ellis Hookes, the first Recording Clerk, writing to Margaret Fell in reply to an enquiry by her as to how Friends had fared, replied:

> people are in great confusion here by reason of the fire which happens in this City to the great destruction and ruin of the same which has not been without a just cause or provocation of the Lord. Concerning what thou desired to know how it was with Friends where the fire was; there were very few but lost a great deale yett not so much I think as the people of ye world lost because Friends were helpful one to the other. I saved thy booke from the fire and last seventh day I gave it to W. Warwick.

Ellis Hookes also rescued Friends' Records, which were kept at the Chamber at the Bull and Mouth Meeting House; this building, which formed part of Northumberland House, and had been the headquarters of Friends since 1655, was destroyed on the last day of the fire.

John Pennyman, a Friend, had his business premises on Ludgate Hill; he also had a cottage in the country at Kentish Town. On the morning of 2nd September he saw from the upper window of his city property, the fire in Thames Street, and sent at once to Kentish Town for two carts and removed his goods to the country.

At the other end of the city lived another Friend, Mary Boreman; she was a spiritually minded woman with strong mystical leading; she was obedient to such leadings. Being a widow with three children, she supported her family by selling oil and lamps. During the visitation of the Plague in 1665, trusting in Providence, she continued her business; none of her family sickened, though her shop was next to a churchyard where many victims of the epidemic were buried. During August 1666 she felt strong promptings to settle all her outstanding debts, which she obeyed.

The Great Fire broke out on the second of September in Pudding Lane, only a short distance from Leadenhall Street,

where Mary Boreman's shop with its inflammable wares was situated. Her servants and children were nervous, so she sent them to the country at Mile End Green, but she herself remained in London. Friends and neighbours urged her to follow while there was yet time, using the argument that it was not right to cause loss to her creditors by not saving her goods. One Friend told her "that she cared nothing that her children might become chargeable to Friends." To these she replied that she did not owe anyone anything and she could work for her children, but she must be faithful to her leadings. When John Homested, who had come 20 miles from the country with a cart to help remove her goods, learnt that there were no debts and that Mary Boreman did not wish to leave, he departed satisfied. The fire had travelled westward, fanned by a strong east wind; the eastern section of the City only suffered damage among the wharves by the river, so that the oil-shop escaped unharmed and Mary Boreman's faith was justified. The churches of St. Catherine Cree and St. Andrews Undershaft, of which the latter adjoined her shop, still survive in Leadenhall Street.

After the fire had abated, when others were charging exorbitant prices, Mary Boreman said she dare not raise the price of her goods but must allow her customers to benefit from her preservation.

The spectacle of the fire and its effect on the atmosphere must have been awe-inspiring. In *Reliquiae Baxterianae* we read "To see the air, as far as could be beheld, so filled with the smoke that the sun shined through it with a colour of blood; yea even when it was setting in the west, it so appeared to them that dwelt on the west side of the City."

George Whitehead describes how Friends reacted to the catastrophe:

> Our meetings were held on fourthday weekly at Wheeler Street, our usual place, the Bull and Mouth being demolished by the fire; and at the other parts of and about the City, we kept our Meetings at the usual time and places, as at the Peel in John Street, at Westminster, Horslydown, Ratcliff and Devonshire House. We had some respite and ease from violent persecution and disturbance until the city came in a great measure to be rebuilt. Our adversaries took no warning by the Plague nor the following consuming fire which had laid waste the best part of the City.

In the long run much good came out of what at the time seemed a terrible misfortune. Building Acts were passed which ensured that houses were built of brick, with brick or stone partitions, no oversailing was allowed, streets were widened and "New River" water made available to all households.

When William Penn was laying out the city of Philadelphia in his new state of Pennsylvania, he had in mind the Great Fire of London and planned that each house should have space round it to prevent any fire from spreading. He also planned the streets wide and straight with no bottle-necks that might impede transport in the event of a similar catastrophe.

Caroline Graveson in her story of "The Farthing Family" has described the fire of London from the point of view of a Quaker living near Aldersgate. While the story is fiction the description of the experience of this family is based on accounts left by people who were living in the City, and can be taken as typical of the experience of London Quakers at the time.

GEORGE W. EDWARDS

NOTE ON SOURCES

Friends House Library: Cross collection, 64; Swarthmore MSS.
A. R. Barclay, *Letters, &c., of early Friends*, 1841, p. 160.
W. G. Bell, *The Great Fire of London in 1666*, 1920.
R. Bury, *Collection of sundry messages and warnings*, 1713–28.
S. Pepys, *Diary*.
Quakeriana, i. 136.
G. Whitehead, *Christian Progress*, 1725, pp. 291–316, and in particular, pp. 314–16.