

Letting their lives speak. Priscilla Hannah Gurney, the Cotterells family, and Thomas Matchett

The Quaker Burial Ground, Widcombe, Bath

Priscilla Hannah Gurney 22/6/1757-17/11/1828

Priscilla Hannah Gurney was born in Norwich, the elder of the two daughters of Joseph Gurney and Christiana Barclay. She had one sister, Christiana, who is also buried in the Bath Quaker Burial Ground. Her cousin was Elizabeth Gurney who later became Elizabeth Fry. Priscilla's father died when she was four and six years later her mother remarried John Freame, who was her first cousin. A son was born but sadly John had poor health and died in 1770. The family moved to Bath where her mother remarried for the third time to Sir William Watson, a physician, scientist and non-Quaker. This was the second time that Priscilla's mother had married against the rules of the Society of Friends, marriage with first cousins and non-Quakers both being frowned upon. On both occasions she had escaped with a loving reprimand rather than disownment, but she was determined that her daughters should not offend in this way and kept a close eye on their suitors.

Priscilla Hannah was torn between the influence of her Quaker relatives and her worldly friends in Bath at a time when the city was the most fashionable resort in the country. She attended fancy balls, concerts and plays but her writings shows that she was struggling spiritually. One of her close friends persuaded her to be baptised and convert to the Church of England but she was still unsatisfied. Eventually the mental anguish became too much, and she decided to commit totally to becoming a Quaker. Her mother asked Priscilla not to change her appearance and Priscilla tried to oblige but eventually felt compelled to dress and speak as a 'plain Friend'

When she was 27 Priscilla moved to Coalbrookdale to live with Richard and Rebecca Reynolds, both Quakers, whom she called her parental friends. Here she began to feel secure in her faith and in 1792 became a Quaker minister and travelled extensively. The well-known anti-slavery campaigner and Quaker, Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, wrote of Priscilla in 1789 that 'her course stuffed gown contrasted with the exquisite beauty and delicacy of her hands and arms, her snow-white handkerchief, and her little grey shawl, her dark brown hair divided in the manor of a gothic arch over her fair forehead. Then she wore a black silk hood over her cap, and all over a black beaver bonnet in the shape of a pewter plate, which was then esteemed the official dress of the gallery.'

In 1798 her cousin Elizabeth Gurney (later Fry) was sent to see Priscilla when she was going through her own spiritual struggle.

Priscilla returned to Bath after the death of Rebecca Reynolds to be with her sister Christiana. In her unpublished history 'Quakers in Bath' Peggy Bridges (a former Bath Quaker, now deceased) wrote that 'In 1817 the Bath Chronicle of March 18th reported that "this day, between two and three o' clock in the afternoon, when the Pump room was full of fashionables, a Mr Fox, attended by several other Quakers, addressed the company from some time, after which a Mrs Priscilla Gurney of the same persuasion commenced and oration, but was prevailed upon by some gentlemen to desist".'

Eventually confined to her house by an extreme susceptibility of the lungs, but still welcoming small groups of friends, she died in Bath on 17 November 1828 at the age of 71.

The spiritual autobiography 'Memoirs of the Life and Religious Experience of Priscilla Hannah Gurney' was issued in 1834, six years after her death. Much of its interest lies in

what it tells us about the struggles of one brought up both among Friends and 'in the world'. Priscilla Hannah is referred to by both her names because there was a contemporary Priscilla Gurney who was also a minister.

The Cotterell Family

The Cotterells were a well-known Bath business family and four members of the family are buried in the Burial Ground: Henry Fowler Cotterell (1792-1860), his wife Sarah (1783-1865), their son Jacob Henry (1817-1868), and Charles Sheward Cotterell (1800-1865), the younger brother of Henry Fowler.

Henry Cotterell 22/10/1791-11/7/1860

Henry Fowler Cotterell married Sarah in 1815. Henry, like his father-in-law Jacob Sturge (from Westbury on Trym), was a land agent and surveyor. Henry came from a long line of Bristol Quaker families, but we don't know any more about his family before this date.

Henry and Sarah came to Bath between 1817 and 1827 for business purposes. A number of his letter books are preserved at the Museum of Bath at Work. Those dating from between 1828 and 1829 show he became engineer to the Avon and Gloucester railway. He also worked for the Bath Turnpike Trustees and the Kennet and Avon Canal Company, and looked into the land requirements for the proposed Clifton Suspension Bridge.

In 1827 it is noted in our local Friends Meeting minutes that he was one of those who helped progress the new burial ground in Widcombe (1827) and was later instrumental when Friends bought the Meeting House in York Street in the 1860s.

Jacob Cotterell 1817-14/8/1868

Sarah and Henry had six children. Their eldest son, Jacob, followed his father into the surveying profession. He was also a Quaker and at the age of 20 signed 'The Pledge' and in 1838 became the first Chairman of 'Bath Juvenile Temperance Society'. In 1861 he was elected President of the 'Bath Temperance Association', the year they donated the Rebecca Fountain to the Corporation of Bath (a well-known local landmark located outside Bath Abbey).

In 1852 Jacob extensively mapped the city for the use of Bath City Council. His highly detailed map records the buildings, gardens and streets of Bath as well as the underground sewers and waterpipes. Apparently the maps were so detailed that you could also see house numbers. This plan was the last significant independent map of the city, before the arrival of the Ordnance Survey.

Thomas Darling Matchett 1881-1/5/1918

Thomas's story is profoundly tragic. He was one of a small number of Conscientious Objectors who died under conviction, so to speak, during World War 1.

Thomas was born in Belfast and in 1907 married Ada Hodder from Frome, Somerset. They lived at The Triangle in Bath where he was employed as a teacher at Oldfield Park Adult School. Thomas refused to acknowledge the legality of conscription, and was arrested and taken before the Bath Tribunal arguing that he would best serve the nation through teaching. 'For a long time,' he said, 'I have been trying to regulate my life along the lines which come under the legal definition of a conscientious objector, not to combatant service alone, but to all war, and that being ostensibly, although I believe by a decision of the High Court not actually, recognised by the Military Service Acts 2 and 3, I feel I am here, as I said, under false pretences, and that is all.'

The tribunal imposed the maximum penalty of £2 and handed him over to the military authorities. He was court martialled at Weymouth and imprisoned at Wormwood Scrubs, where he 'suffered in health during his confinement', losing over 15 lbs in weight. His second term of imprisonment was for one year at Dorchester Prison. Contracting tuberculosis, and developing a haemorrhage, he was sent to a sanatorium near Bath, but he was gravely ill and was soon released to return home. (Hansard, 20 February 1918, volume 103, cc715-6). He died not long after his release.

Thomas's grave may be unique because it contains the inscription 'Conscientious Objector'. This goes beyond the traditional Quaker practice of permitting just the deceased's name and dates on a memorial. It is also unlikely that the Church of England would have allowed such words to appear on a gravestone.