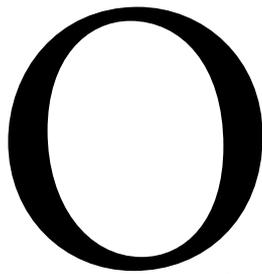


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# Standing on ceremony: *Kate MacDonald* on a long-lost certificate

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*‘In 2010 a Museum volunteer opened the scrapbook by chance...’*



On 29 September 1699, two Quakers married in Bath: Thomas Rose and Mary Fry. Their marriage certificate was signed by thirty-five Friends and family who had attended the marriage, an old Quaker practice maintained to this day. Like many other historic

documents ‘the certificate remain[ed] the property of the married couple and [was] handed down in families as an heirloom until finally lost, destroyed, or more happily, deposited with a historical or genealogical society’. That’s what happened with the Rose-Fry certificate. After 300 years of obscurity it was found at the back of a Victorian scrapbook of miscellaneous papers, at the Wiltshire Museum in Devizes.

In 1861, the certificate was sent to William Cunnington, one of the founders of the Museum, by the Devizes painter James Waylen (1810-1894). Waylen was then working in the London drawing-office of Thomas Telford, designing St Katharine’s Docks in the Port of London. He wrote on 5 January to Cunnington saying that he had long promised a colleague ‘some supplementary papers about Devizes which had been “kicking about”’ (incidentally this is the earliest known use of that deceptively modern phrase) and enclosed them with the letter in case they were of interest, including a transcription of the words of the certificate. Cunnington pasted this transcription into the scrapbook housing the ‘supplementary papers about Devizes’ that Waylen had donated. Some thirty years later, in 1894, Cunnington added a pencil note to the transcription that he also had the original marriage

certificate in his possession. At some point after that the certificate disappeared again, presumably placed accidentally in another scrapbook, where it stayed protected but hidden for over a century.

In 2010 a Museum volunteer opened the scrapbook by chance and found the certificate. Noticing that this was a Quaker document, the volunteer told Jean Thomson of Devizes Quaker Meeting about the sighting, but by then the certificate had disappeared again into storage, still uncatalogued. Jean had to wait for nine more years before the certificate reappeared in late 2019. After lockdown restrictions had been lifted, in January 2023 local Quakers were finally able to see the certificate, 324 years after it had been written.

The certificate is printed on a broad rectangle of yellow parchment measuring 450 x 375mm, a little larger than a modern A3 sheet. Its Stuart lettering is still crisp and black compared to its handwritten text, whose ink is browning with age. It has a small square of soft blue paper attached to the top left corner, embossed with an official stamp carrying the arms of the then monarchs William III and Mary II. A few years earlier, in 1694, parliament had passed ‘An Act for granting to their Majesties severall Dutyes upon Velum Parchment and Paper for Four Yeares towards carryng on the warr against France’. By this Act a range of taxes were now payable on legal certificates, and a marriage certificate cost five shillings. In the 1690s, during a period of stable currency values, this would have been worth around two days’ wages for a labourer.

But why was a certificate needed at all? After the Restoration of 1660, Quakers had ‘reverted to the medieval practice of unsolemnised matrimony by common consent’. Quakers had been persecuted under





English law for thirty years and knew the value of legal records, so they had constructed a detailed process of examination and record-keeping, to ensure that their marriages and other civil proceedings adhered to Quaker practice, and to record as much evidence as possible for any future defence against accusations that Quaker

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marriages were illegal. They retained this practice even after a Nottingham judge’s ruling in 1661 that the Quaker form of marriage was valid. Quaker ‘preoccupation with documentation, which provided proof of their reputation as a people of order “in the light” was also a central part of their religious identity. Like those concerned with ensuring that Church of England marriages complied with the law, Quaker practice required that couples who registered their intention to marry had to prove to the officiating Meeting that they had no impediments to marriage. The marriage certificate came at the end of a long period of enquiry that focused on collective discernment by Friends in each Meeting concerned that the proposed marriage received ‘approbation.’ ‘The need for collective approbation exemplified their adherence to “unity in the Spirit” [...] Once a couple received approbation to marry, often called “clearness”, their marriage would be “witnessed” by a meeting and “published” in the Book of Minutes. Finally, a certificate was drawn up and signed by the witnesses.’

The Thomas-Fry certificate states: ‘Having declared

their Intentions of taking each other in Marriage before several publick Meetings of the people of God called QUAKERS in the *forsaid County* according to the good Order used among them, whole Proceedings therein, after a Deliberate Consideration thereof (with Regard unto the Righteous Law of God, and example of his People recorded in the Scriptures of Truth in that Case) were *approved of* by the said Meetings, they appearing clear of all others, and having Consent of *parents and relations* concerned.’ (Italics added for handwritten text.)

‘Appearing clear of all others’ was a consideration for all religious groups as well as for civil law. In a period in which marriage records were not uniformly recorded, and communication between parishes could be patchy or non-existent, bigamy could be carried out with relative ease, so all those with the responsibility for officiating at a marriage had a strong interest in ascertaining that neither party was already married or promised in marriage. Quakers had no officiating minister, so the recording of the preliminary investigations, and the marriage itself, fell to the Friends who ‘kept the book’ – those who wrote the formal record of Quaker Meetings for administration and business, still standard practice for Quakers today. Quaker marriages, along with births and deaths, had been recorded in separate registers since the 1650s. Copies of marriage certificates were made routinely for the formal records, as evidenced by a handwritten copy of a Staffordshire marriage certificate from 1691, containing more than sixty signatures.

Remarkably, two bound volumes containing the handwritten ‘Minutes of the Monthly Meeting of Friends in the North Division of Somersetshire’, which includes Bath, have survived for the years 1667 to 1712, and are

now held by the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre in Chippenham. Two months after the 1699 Thomas-Fry marriage, the Monthly Meeting (one of several administrative meetings held to discern matters relating to property, discipline and the regulation of marriages) recorded: 'It is agreed at this Meeting that all Marriages that shall for time to com happen within this Division that they wld [be given to] the frind that keeps the book to have their Certificates drawed up; that it may be don according to the order of frinds.'

This suggests that North Somerset Friends were interested in the standardisation of their marriage records, which may not have hitherto been done 'to the order of frinds'. The Thomas-Fry certificate had been partially printed, rather than handwritten, which suggests a similar desire to ensure that a common form of words was used. Two years earlier, a Quaker marriage at a London Meeting in 1697 (which had been attended by William Penn) was recorded and signed on a printed marriage certificate. A fully-printed copy of a marriage certificate from 1685 may be examined in the Early English Books Online database, indicating that some Friends felt that marriages needed to be recorded so permanently as to pay for the setting up in type of every word of the certificate for circulation, even the names of the witnesses. Yet there are nuances in the printing of certificates.

The Thomas-Fry certificate is a printed parchment sheet with spaces left blank to be filled in with details particular to each marriage. The information to be filled in by hand consisted of the names of the groom and bride, and their fathers; the professions of the men; where the declaration of the groom and bride's intent to marry took place; that the Meetings, parents and relations approved; the date of the marriage; that Thomas and Mary met there publicly specifically to be married; where they married; the vows they said out loud; and the signatures of the thirty-five witnessing Friends.

The printed portions of the certificate set out the marriage's basis in Scriptural foundations, and reiterate the adherence to 'good order' in the marriage procedures used by Quakers as a religious body. However, this raises the point that Quakers abide by the leadings of the Spirit, not the law. 'Quaker wedding declarations did vary in part due to the nature of declarations, as they were shared as the silence and the inward light moved them.' A pre-printed marriage certificate could thus not record the words to be spoken by those accepting each other in marriage, as this was contrary to Quaker practice, adhering to a form of words that came from civil law rather than from the spirit. The Rose-Fry certificate meets the problem halfway. The words spoken by Thomas and Mary are indeed handwritten, but they are identical in form, and both texts end with 'until it shall please the Lord by Death to separate us or words to that effect'. The scribe, presumably writing at the marriage itself, or shortly beforehand, since the signatures of the witnesses seem to be in the same ink and to have aged at the same rate, made it possible for the Spirit to be heard during the Meeting, and the law to be kept in the certificate.

Thomas Rose and Mary Fry were married at the

Quakers' 'publick Meeting-place' whose name was filled in by hand as 'Witcum near Bath'. The printed text conveys the expectation that the marriage would take place in a Meeting House, licenced for that purpose by law. As far as is known there was no Meeting house in 'Witcum', now Widcombe, a district across the river Avon from the city of Bath. In 1697 Bath Quakers had begun to meet regularly in Bath itself at premises licensed as a Meeting House in Marchants Court, now Northumberland Place, which were owned by Richard Marchant. No licensed Meeting House in Witcum was listed in the records for 1689, and none has been found in the Yearly Meeting returns for Somerset. Given the

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proximity of the new Bath Meeting House it is unlikely that there would have been a need for another Meeting House only ten minutes' walk away, even for a thriving community of Friends. Richard Marchant was a tailor, a prominent Bath Quaker who had attended the North Somerset Monthly Meetings since at least 1696, presumably representing Bath Friends. He also owned some land in Widcombe across the river from Bath Abbey, where he had once allowed his friend John Wesley to preach. The 'Witcum' of the marriage certificate may have been the location of a private house used by Friends but not yet licensed as a Meeting house. Richard Marchant, his wife Elizabeth, and a Mary Marchant signed their names on the marriage certificate in the same column as the names of Samuel and Richard Fry, the bride's father and possibly her brother, and of the groom's father, William Rose. This suggests that the Marchants were related to the bride. We know from the Bath Monthly Minutes that Mary Fry was 'late of London, now of Bath'. A year before her marriage the Somerset Quarterly Meeting had enjoined its members 'to keep Friends, as much they can, for servants, and not to place Friends' children to serve in the World'. Her father Samuel lived in Trowbridge, some ten miles away from Bath. Mary may have been in service in London and moved to Bath with her employers, or she may have moved to live with or work for the Marchants. She may have been married from their home, but these are merely guesses: we know nothing more about her or her life.

What makes the Devizes certificate notable for Quaker history is the name of the bride. Mary Fry may possibly have been related through her father to the notable Quakers the Fry family from Malmesbury and, later, Sutton Benger in Wiltshire, twenty miles north-east of Bath. That Fry family were wealthy clothiers in

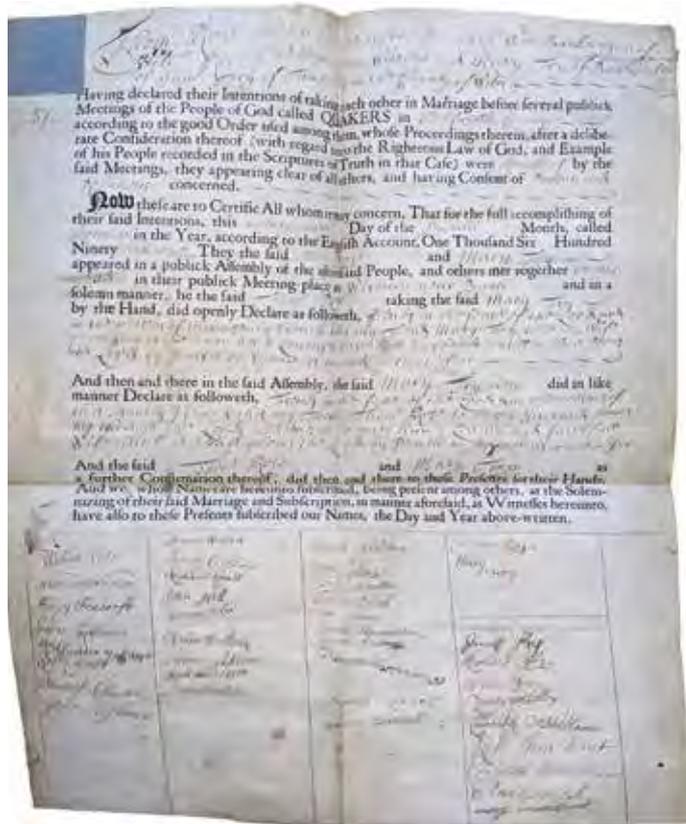
the seventeenth century, and their descendants include the eighteenth-century chocolate-maker and typefounder Joseph Fry whose son and grandsons established the firm J S Fry & Sons in Bristol, and another, later, Joseph Fry who married Elizabeth Gurney in 1800. She would later become famous as Elizabeth Fry the nineteenth-century prison reformer.

We know almost nothing about the Rose family, except that the groom was a baker and his father William was a wheeler or wheel-maker. A Thomas Rose was recorded as one of the Friends 'judged meete for keeping the mens meeting' for Frome Quakers in 1668. It's not impossible that this is the same Thomas Rose who married Mary Fry thirty years later, but he may also be the groom's grandfather who might later have moved to Devizes, twenty miles away. There are several Rose families in Devizes today.

The date of the marriage is a curiosity. The certificate records it as having taken place on 'this *Twenty Ninth* Day of the *seventh* Month, called *September* in the Year, according to the English Account, One Thousand Six Hundred and Ninety and *Nine*' (the handwritten text given here in italics). September is now the ninth month, but in 1699, as it had been in England for several hundred years, it was the seventh month. At this date, then alone in western Europe, the 'uniquely English custom of starting the year of 25 March rather than 1 January' made March the first month in the English legal year. English calendars would not be aligned with the rest of Europe until 1750. Enumerating the months rather than naming them by names derived from pagan or Catholic names was a Quaker custom that had been mooted first in 1650 during the Commonwealth.

Thomas and Mary's marriage certificate was kept carefully. Its clean folds have evidently been opened so rarely that their edges are still intact. Parchment is very responsive to humidity so clearly the certificate had been kept in a dry place for centuries. It is a beautiful object in itself, not inexpensive, and testifies to the active and healthy community of Quakers in Somerset and Wiltshire at this time, and for the social values that the marriage represents. The legible signatures of the witnesses indicate a high level of literacy in this community, and a strong show of support for this Quaker marriage. Their numbers also indicate the growth of Quakers in the Bath area. In 1668 there had been only three Quakers recorded for Bath and Bathford together (Thomas Collins, Richard Am[e]sbury, Thomas Morley, plus their families). The attendance numbers for the Thomas-Fry marriage suggest that the Bath community of Friends may have grown ten-fold in a generation. It was also a close-knit and strongly connected community, reaching back to the beginnings of the Quaker movement. The 1669 marriage certificate of the founders of Quakerism, George Fox and Margaret Fell, was signed by ninety-four Friends, including John Dando of Hallatrow, a long-standing Friend who attended the North Somerset Monthly Meetings in the 1690s with Richard Marchant.

What we have, then, is a record of a deeply-personal event in the lives of two people who have long been



forgotten and may not have left any other trace of their lives in the historical record. Their marriage certificate records a union across two divisions in Quaker organisation, using a well-established administrative system that testifies to the serious intent of Quakers to abide by the law while maintaining their own deeply-held religious concerns. The record of those attending the marriage indicates the numbers of Friends in Wiltshire and North Somerset who were moved – emotionally and geographically – to support Thomas and Mary in their new life with spiritual and physical support. Their marriage certificate is a metaphorical palimpsest, containing layers of meaning and significance for the religious and local communities of their day.

Many questions remain unanswered: who Thomas and Mary were, how old they were, how they met, what their lives were like, where they lived, when they died, whether they had children. We know very little about the logistics of arranging a marriage that needed such a sophisticated certificate of record. Who printed it? Where was it bought? Was it a common administrative solution or a local innovation? Much more research can be done to investigate these questions, in the archives of local museums and heritage centres that hold such material for us. We are lucky to have it. ●

*Kate is from West Wiltshire & East Somerset Area Meeting. She is grateful to Jean Thomson of Devizes Quakers for making sure that the certificate received attention, and to Jane Schon and David Dawson of the Wiltshire Museum for permission to reproduce it as a scanned digitised image.*