

THE QUAKER MILLER OF NAILSWORTH

by J. SIMMONS

Anthony Fewster was a cornmillier, and leading member of the Society of Friends, the Quakers, working and living in the Nailsworth area. He bought and sold a great deal of corn at local markets, Tetbury, Cirencester, Gloucester and as far away as Bristol, which involved haulage by water. In his journal he kept a constant watch on the state of the markets and notes the rise and fall of the trade.

He was a most interesting man and from his journal one can get to know a great deal of the local conditions and countrywide problems during his time. He was a great observer of the people, the poverty, and trading conditions that prevailed. He was a very strict Quaker, and was probably the leader of his local group. He lectured on many subjects and papers contained details of his lectures on such subjects as peace, pacifism, the dangers of drink, total abstinence being above all else what he desired. Even lectures on biology and a cure of warts were contained in his notes. He held very firm views on slavery and the evils of this trade, the Quakers being very active in holding meetings all over the country for its abolition, and he travelled widely about the County to attend meetings concerning this subject.

He married twice, in 1816 to Hannah Garner, who died in 1827, and later to Martha, by whom he had a beloved daughter named Patsy. He was High Constable for the Hundred of Longtree and a Guardian of the Poor for the Horsley Division of the Stroud Union in March 1846. Some of the duties of the high constables were to attend Petty Sessions held for their Hundred, report conditions of the hundred over which they presided, keep a book noting all out of pocket transactions mostly in the transport of vagrants out of the parish. He had much personal correspondence with local people on social conditions. In one letter Sir Francis Hyett of Painswick House sets out to prove to Mr. Fewster that the crime of forgery had not decreased since the abolition of it being a capital offence, as Fewster seemed to believe.

Monthly Quaker meetings were held on Sunday morning at the beginning of the month, and were well attended. Fewster listed points to be followed in everyday life. These included attendance at meetings, truth amongst each other, discouragement of tale bearing, the training of children and servants and people under their care in religious life, conversation consistent with their Christian professions and frequent reading of Holy Scripture, together with plainness of speech and clothing. Friends were to be just in their dealings and punctual in fulfilling their engagements,

against paying the tithes, priests' demands and church rates. They were to keep a faithful testimony against the bearing of arms, and to help the poor. This seems to be a list of standards that were asked at each meeting, and one presumes the leaders could exact a punishment for any breaking of these rules.

He wrote at length of the evils of drink and must have lectured widely on this. "Enough has been said to insure every man who has any regard for his health and comfort - his temperate and spiritual well being, the comfort and welfare of his family or the good of society at large to give up at once if unhappily he had fallen into this vile practice of drinking. It is a filthy creeping insidious enemy that is incessantly labouring to destroy him and will rapidly do so if he be not timely and manfully strong to carry him body and soul into hell."

A letter from a friend Mr. Brewin of Cirencester in 1854 discusses the merits of the Patriotic Fund, and how the Quakers were trying to avoid subscribing to it, as it might become an encouragement for war, but it was thought permissible to subscribe to setting up a soup kitchen. Amongst his papers were printed tracts of the Society for the Promoting of Permanent and Universal Peace, on War and the early Christians, the writings of Erasmus on the subject of war, sketches on the Horrors of War, chiefly selected from the Labaume narrative of the campaign in Russia in 1812, and on Universal Peace.

On the subject of famine relief he gave a paper in praise of the cultivation of potatoes as an answer to starvation among the poor, although this must have been against his own trade as a cornmillier. An acre of wheat would produce about 20 bushels which in turn furnished 268 quartern loaves, giving a 2 quartern loaf to a man per day, therefore lasting him about 9 months. On the other hand an acre of potatoes would yield 60 sacks, which would supply a man with food for 1280 days, rather more than 3½ years.

In July 1851 in his journal he wrote of a visit he paid to the Great Exhibition, and stayed in London for several days, which he found rather trying and very hot. Although he enjoyed the excitement of the capital, and visited during his stay a zoo and attended a peace convention, he was very happy to return to the quiet of the Cotswolds.

He loved the countryside and his garden, watching the passing seasons and making many notes about the early or lateness of spring and the severity of the winters. An example of his notes was that in 1844 in the first week of January the temperature had kept up to 52 degrees. He had a weather glass and a

barometer in the hall of his house which he watched daily and made daily reports, commenting that winter that the buds were swelling and the flowers beginning to bloom. "The flowers opening their wondering petals as if they had mistaken January for March or April." He was constantly writing about the beauty of the crops as they stood in the fields, the sunshine and the blueness of the sky, a straight-forward man reflecting in his writing his simple faith and following of the Society of Friends which appeared to have been the main-spring of his life.

His constant complaint written in his journal over and over again, is his failing always to carry too much stock, and throughout his writing he warned himself to try and draw his attention to this fault: "This has every been my besetting failing I am quite ashamed to say anything about amendment to this matter as I still go on in the same manner."

His journal is a daily and weekly report on the state of the markets and the relation the weather and political dealings have to do with the price of the corn. The year 1845 seems to have been fairly typical. The winter was long with continuous frost up to March followed by a very dry early summer. The weather appeared to break rather early, in June, before the hay harvest had been completed. By September the harvesting was late and the wheat was only ripening slowly with an immense proportion of straw. The potatoes during this year showed the beginning of the period when blight devastated the crop, with the great potato famine in Ireland and affected crops in Belgium and Holland. As a result there was a shortage of grain imported to Britain, and prices rose. By November the account on the potato crop was so serious that there was talk of the opening the ports to free trade, but no order was given and corn prices increased further. Continued wet weather was very unfavourable for the new wheat, which came to the market in very bad condition. Again he wrote a note to himself to keep a short stock, for independent of the new price being now so high, the grain would not keep. The market became very flat as there was a possibility of Parliament being recalled to repeal the Corn laws. Peel, the Prime Minister, resigned in consequence of not having been able to bring Wellington and the Cabinet to repeal the Corn Laws, and the dissolution of Parliament followed. Lord John Russell was called in, but failed to form a government, so that everything was at a standstill until in early January, the next year, Peel was recalled. The country waited until the end of the month for Peel to bring forward his measures and the debate lasted until June. Fewster remarked at the final passing of the Corn Law that after a very long struggle of the people with the aristocracy this 'just measure'

was accomplished and he hoped that it would be attended with very beneficial results to the entire community. The following year the potato crop again failed and wheat prices rose to the highest since 1828. The general state of the country was so bad that large numbers of the labourers working on the new railroads were stood off for want of capital. The money flow all over the country was greatly affected and the only source of imported wheat was America.

All through his journal and writings Fewster seems more anxious about the plight of the common man, therefore following his teaching in the Society of Friends, than the best price he can obtain for his corn.