

Five Generations of Quaker Seebohms: 1790-1990

Bibliographical commentary

The English branch of the Seebohm family has kept its records, as have many of the Quaker dynasties. A wide range of letters and other original documents is with the Hertfordshire Record Office at Hertford¹. The family still holds selective transcripts of letters made by the daughters of Frederic Seebohm (son of Benjamin) in the early years of the twentieth century, together with many photographs, not all identifiable. An important source book for the earlier period is *Private Memoirs of B and E Seebohm*, edited by their sons, Provost & Co 1873. For the Hitchin connection, Reginald Hine's *History of Hitchin*² has a long chapter on the Quakers, and several of the people I speak of, including Frederic Seebohm (son of Benjamin) have chapters in his *Hitchin Worthies*³. My sister Victoria Glendinning wrote a book called *A Suppressed Cry* (Routledge & Kegan Paul 1969, shortly to be republished by Virago) about Frederic's daughter Winnie who went up to Newnham College, Cambridge in 1885 and died of asthma aged 22 after her first term. Most male members of the family were given obituaries in either *The Friend* or *The Times* or both. Apart from these and other sources I shall mention, members of Quaker families can often be pursued through the loose leaf folders maintained in the Friends House Library.

The German core of the Seebohm family, and in particular Hans Hermann Seebohm of Florida who has kept in contact with them, maintain genealogical records, enhanced by data from Mormon sources, which give a very full account of the origins and dispersal of everyone carrying the Seebohm surname or its early variants. Research results were circulated in typescript at a family reunion in May 1991⁴. These show that there are no grounds for the belief of some English Seebohms that the family might be of Swedish origin. Apparently a lot of North Germans laid claim to Swedish antecedents after the Thirty Years War for the same reason that people claimed to be Norman rather than English after the Norman Conquest.

My main source for the historical background to Quakerism was *Portrait in Grey* by John Punshon (Quaker Home Service 1984). Some quotations (and their sources) come from the publication *Christian Faith and Practice in the Experience of the Society of Friends*⁵. Many anecdotes and their sources are given by Hine in *History of Hitchin*. In discussing the Quaker rejection of the arts, he mentions that Galton found a high incidence of colour blindness among Friends. It was prideful to display family portraits (some had them in bedrooms rather than downstairs), though the Seebohms seem to have preserved a good collection of images, and many of them were water colourists of considerable talent. The Latchmore family who ran a photographic business in Hitchin were Friends. To master a musical instrument took up time better spent in other ways, and to achieve perfection was spiritually suspect. One reason for rejecting the theatre was that to play a part was untruthful. On the few occasions they saw plays, the Victorian Seebohms were impressed and responsive; they wrote elaborate pieces for amateur theatricals.

¹ Under the headings D/ESe and D/ESo

² R L Hine *The History of Hitchin*, George Allen and Unwin Vol 2 1929

³ R L Hine *Hitchin Worthies*, George Allen and Unwin 1932

⁴ Copies available from Richard Seebohm

⁵ *London Yearly Meeting of the Society of Friends 1960*, now superseded by *Quaker Faith and Practice*, Britain Yearly Meeting, 1995.

George Dillwyn's story is told in Quaker Biographies, a compilation in Friends House Library (Vol 1 Chapter 3). Apparently he was "at first worldly and engaged in mercantile pursuits, but these proved a disappointment". On being convinced as a Friend he broke his flute in pieces. This is in contrast to an unnamed City Friend who used to take his flute up the Monument once a year so that he could play without being overheard⁶. Be that as it may, George Dillwyn left America in the Ministry in 1784 with the support of his Yearly Meeting and did not go back until 1791. Hine says that he visited Friends in Hitchin in 1788.

The details of the 1790 visit to Pymont come from Historical Account of Friends in Germany (London Yearly Meeting Proceedings 1865) and from Sarah Grubb (Journal). Subsequent events are described in the Historical Account and also in B and E Seebohm.

Benjamin Seebohm edited the Memoirs of the Life and Gospel Labours of Stephen Grellet (A W Bennett, 2 vols, 1860); his life is also told in a number of secondary works. Friends House Library has a Memorial of the Monthly Meeting of New York concerning Elizabeth Coggeshall which gives the basic events of her life. The Hustler family is described in some detail in H R Hodgson The Society of Friends in Bradford, Percy Lund Humphries, Bradford, 1926.

One of the places Benjamin visited on his way to England was the tiny Quaker colony at Congénies near Nîmes in the extreme south of France. There again, and uniquely for France, travelling American Friends had found receptive worshippers (in 1788) and brought them into the Society. Its history was written up in 1978 by Nicolette Devas under the title Susannah's Nightingales. The Quakerism didn't last, but some English Quakers have now bought the former Friends Meeting House to use as a holiday centre.

The Tuke family appears from time to time in the Seebohm story. Its records are mainly in the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research at the University of York, though some are at Hertford (indexed rather perversely as Tooke). W K and E M Sessions published a short account of the family as The Tukes of York (Friends Home Service Committee 1971). Friends Provident Institution is described in Arthur Rowntree One Hundred Years of the Friends Provident (1932) and D Tregoning and H Cockerell Friends for Life, Henry Melland 1982.

All the material on Benjamin Seebohm's ministry and his family life comes from B and E Seebohm, as does most of the story of the Letterfrack venture. There are, however, other descriptions of his impact on individuals, notably in Barclay Fox's Journal⁷. J G Whittier's remarks are quoted in J Travis Mills John Bright and the Quakers, Methuen 1935. William Ransom's mention of barn burning comes in A Quaker Journal ed G E Bryant and G P Baker Hutchinson 1933.

For Henry Seebohm's life and career I am indebted to the researches of Paul Hobson of Sheffield, who has been collecting material for some ten years and has copies of his various addresses to learned societies. The history of his steelmaking business is set out in Centenary, Arthur Balfour & Co Ltd, Sheffield 1965. The firm took the name of Arthur Balfour & Co from its subsequent Chairman (a namesake of the Unionist leader and Prime Minister, who himself was politically prominent in the 1920s). The firm is now part of Aurora Steel Ltd. We still lack documentation on the untimely death of Henry's son Ted.

⁶ A Neave Brayshaw *The Quakers, Their Story and Message* 2 edn 1927

⁷ Ed R L Brett, Bell and Hyman 1979

The main source for the history of the Quaker country banks which merged in 1896 to form Barclay & Co Ltd is P W Matthews and A W Tuke's History of Barclays Bank Limited, Blades East and Blades 1926. However, this gives no hint, other than a cursory description of the failure of Gurney & Overend (whose partners had ceased to be Quakers), that the nineteenth century saw commercial panics and bank failures at regular intervals. Hine in Hitchin Worthies fills in some additional banking detail, mentioning that Francis Lucas had a younger brother Theodore who served in the Bank without being a partner.

The Rowntree story is told mainly in Anne Vernon A Quaker Business Man, The Life of Joseph Rowntree 1836-1925, George Allen and Unwin 1958.

Philip Gribble's autobiography is called Off the Cuff (Phoenix House 1964). The banking careers of Hugh Seebohm and his son Frederic can be followed in part in A W Tuke and R J H Gillman Barclays Bank Ltd 1926-1969, 1972 and Sir Julian Crossley and John Blandford The DCO Story: A history of banking in many countries 1925-71, 1975, both published by the Barclays group of banks, and they also feature in Friends for Life mentioned above.

The architect for the 1836 Friends Meeting House in Hitchin was F W Dankes of Gloucester. It replaced a 1694 Meeting House in what was originally Cod Piece Alley, then Quaker Alley and now West Alley, running alongside the Barclays Bank building in High Street.

I am grateful to my surviving relatives and in particular to Eileen Seebohm and her son Richard and to my aunt Fidelity Countess of Cranbrook for their recollections and records. I was given valuable help by Alison Taylor, Curator of the Hitchin Museum and by Elizabeth Jackson, Librarian of the Rowntree Foundation. I owe the Hitchin Historical Society my warmest thanks for inviting me to prepare this material in the first instance. I am left with several themes and stories crying out for fuller capture, to say nothing of the images shown to the Society as slides which may not be as easy to offer on the page.

Since writing the above I have seen J Ormerod Greenwood Quaker Encounters, vol 2, Vines on the Mountains Sessions, York 1977. This contains confirmatory accounts of the activities of travelling Friends in the 18th and 19th centuries, with salutary non-Seebohm perspectives on the Pymont community. A much more detailed account of Ludwig's life has been researched from German sources by Claus Bernet (now of Halle University) and published in the Friends Quarterly January 2004. I have not (yet) incorporated his findings in my text.

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