

Written by Godfrey Hugh William BRAMHALL about his great-grandfather
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My great-grandfather John PIGOTT 1832- 1920 and his family

My great-grandfather was born in Faringdon in 1832. He was the fourth child of Hugh Pigott and his wife Miriam. The family home was in Gloucester Street where Hugh carried on his bakery business.

There can be little doubt that John and his brothers and sisters all attended the British School for the children of non-conformist families. Like their parents they were all literate. In his autobiography John's elder brother Robert gives us two useful clues when he says that he 'can remember but little of schooldays' but that at an early age he had read, in addition to various periodicals, 'Captain Cook's Voyages', 'The Travels of Commodore Anson', 'The Voyages of Francis Drake', 'Pilgrim's Progress', 'The Holy War', 'The Annals of the Poor', 'The Young Cottager', 'The Dairyman's Daughter', 'Harvey's Meditations' and the Bible all through. Surely John and the others must have been nourished on the same literary diet.

Music seems to have been a family interest. Robert learned to play the trombone and to ring the church bells but unfortunately he later took the rather jaundiced view that these pursuits had become 'a snare and deadened all spiritual feelings and desires.' On the other hand John, who played the flute and was also known to strum the occasional tune on the piano, took pleasure in music-making and, later in life, encouraged his son John to learn the violin and paid for his daughters Elizabeth, Alice and Emma to have 'extra' music lessons at their 'dame' school in Filkins.

John learned the cordwainer's trade [leather shoe maker]. In 1855 he married Emma Jane Oldaker whose father, Charles, had come from Witney and established himself as a harness-maker in London Street, Faringdon. Emma was a milliner and straw bonnet maker and, for a time before her marriage, had her own business in Mill Street, Wantage.

By the time of the 1861 Census John had his own shoe-making business in the Corn Market, right in the centre of Faringdon, and was the father of two sons, John who was born in 1858, and Josiah who was born in 1860. The presence of a house-servant, Mary Hedges, would seem to suggest that the business was thriving.

In 1866 Emma Jane died. A year later John married Sarah Day, the daughter of Daniel Day a grocer in Shrivenham. Like the Pigotts the Days were leading members of the Strict Baptist communities in their respective towns, Sarah was a diminutive figure barely five feet in height but according to her third daughter she made up in strength of character what she lacked in inches. In 1870 Sarah gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth Hannah who was later to be known as 'Triss'.

By this time the family had left the cramped accommodation in the Corn

Market and had moved to a house in London Street. I believe that this house was formerly owned by Charles Oldaker for in his will of 1861 he had given his children the option of buying his premises.

In 1871 the family moved to Filkins, a village between Burford and Lechlade. John had abandoned the cordwainer's trade and was now the proprietor of the village store and sub-postmaster as well. Had John financed this move on the proceeds of his Faringdon business or did he receive some assistance from his second father-in-law Daniel Day? We shall never know but it is certain that Daniel was a man of substance for it was he who had purchased a burial ground for the Strict Baptist Chapel at Ashbury.

John and Sarah had three more daughters all of whom were born at Filkins, Alice Ruth in 1876, Emma Jane in 1880 and Grace in 1882. Nurse Swinford, the village midwife was present at all three births.

For this seemingly insignificant detail we have to thank Emma Jane who, at the age of sixty, wrote a detailed and fascinating account of her childhood in Filkins and of the loving home Sarah and John had created there. Emma Jane, an avid reader of guide books and county histories complained bitterly of the neglect suffered by her home village.

Topographical books wander all round its outskirts. They take the reader to Burford, to Chipping Norton, to Northleach and Bibury, down the Windrush valley to Witney or through the Coln valley to Fairford, from thence to Lechlade, back again to Eastleach Martin and Eastleach Turville to make the circuit complete, leaving an ignored little island in the centre unvisited, its charms unsung, its beauties deemed unworthy of praise.

And so she set out to fill the gap and in the process gives us a vivid picture of Filkins, still mercifully unspoilt, her home 'The Evergreens' with a wealth of personalities, anecdotes and botanical observation. Here is Emma Jane's description of the contents of her father's shop, a veritable 'William Whiteley's in miniature',

Wooden clogs were there for wet weather, they made a queer clip, clop noise when worn up and down stone paths. Pattens too, but these were for even wetter weather when the irons, affixed to wooden soles, kept one's feet quite four inches above the puddles in the farmyards. The toe was slipped into an open toe-cap and a strap secured the patten to the instep. They made a loud metallic noise as they struck, tang, tang, on the paved yard.

The characteristic smell of stacks of corduroy suits can never be forgotten, nor the sickly, rank smell of large bundles of tallow candles!

Cook sun bonnets used to fascinate me, stacked one inside the other; they were made of pretty, patterned prints tightly gathered round the face and

piped to make a firm bordering. At the back of the shaped head was a loosely falling frill that protected the field-worker from strong sunshine. All the field women workers wore these in and around our Cotswold village.

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Smock frocks, too, were alluring. The smocking was beautifully worked in reds and blues that looked exceedingly well against the buff-coloured material.

Benzoline hand-lamps used to be sold. They had round wicks, had no glasses and smoked horribly at times.

Even a funeral pall could be hired. It was made of black plush or velvet and had a deep frill of white satin all round which the bearers had to hang on to in windy weather! The coffin was borne on the shoulders of bearers from the house to the church. The mourners followed behind, all walking.

One could buy those little jet ornaments for bonnets that were so favoured by old ladies at that time. They were really amusing for, with every movement of the head the ornaments would jingle and sparkle as the light caught them. Crepe was largely used on mourning clothes. I have seen skirts trimmed half-way up to the waist with this detestable stuff, sleeves covered to the elbow with it and 'Widows' weeds' of it hanging down the back from a hat or bonnet to below the waist.

Many yards of red flannel were sold in those days for chest-protectors and petticoats, indeed everyone deemed a red, flannel petticoat quite a necessity! White frilling, very stiff upstanding stuff used to edge the necks of dresses and a narrower one edged those dainty, black laces, jet-spangled caps worn indoors by elderly ladies of bygone days.

Twist tobacco was chewed by workmen of peculiar taste! Snuff was indulged in by both men and women. Ipecacuanha wine, Blue Vitriol, Red Ruddle, Mace (a fascinating product both in colour and shape), Isinglass, soothing syrups, turmeric, Sal-prunella for one's sore throat, boots and shoes, brooms and besoms, postage stamps and paraffin, tintacks and pins, the latest fashionable hats trimmed and untrimmed or trimmed to order, and the trimming needed in those days was enormous! White, shining hay-rakes, bladders of lard, bright, clear, many-sided lumps of sugar-candy, all these things and many more un-named, to say nothing of toys, books, household linens and fireworks could all be bought at the miniature William Whiteleys!

A limited stock of second-hand furniture was stored in one of the lofts over the warehouse and included some of those brown, wicker baby perambulators on three wheels long ago out of fashion and forgotten.

Toys that the present-day child would scorn were a delight to us of an earlier generation. Wonderful were those kaleidoscopes and those soft green and brown wadding-filled jumping frogs! Penny Noah's Arks, yes!, and containing half-a-dozen animals all made to stand up together with a miniature tree or two! What one could buy with the modest penny in those far-off days!

Emma Jane illustrated her account with sketches she made before she left home, never to return, on March 13th 1898, and with postcards sent to her by friends. With these to help us, my wife and I had no difficulty in identifying 'The Evergreens' when we went in search of it in 1980 and found, to our amazement, that it still serves Filkins as store and post-office today.

The only school in Filkins was the National or Church School. Being a

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Strict Baptist, John was unwilling to send his daughters there so he paid for them to attend a small, private school at 'The Yews', mornings only, music and French in the afternoons and daily assignments of homework.

John was, all his life, a deeply religious man but it seems that there were times when his faith must have been severely tested. A century after the events which must now be related it is hard to appreciate the depth of feeling of the members of the sturdily independent Strict Baptist chapels.

Perhaps the absence of any ordained ministry or any coordinating organization made it inevitable that each 'cause' should develop its own distinctive and even intolerant notions concerning acceptable standards of membership, and that it would be all too easy for strong-minded individuals to find themselves at variance with the majority.

The Minute Book of the Faringdon Block Green Chapel establishes that Hugh Pigott, his elder daughter Mary Counsell, Robert and 'warm-hearted, generous, impetuous' John were all members. On November 6th 1870, shortly before John's move to Filkins, there appears the following minute:

Mr. Whiting then introduced Mr John Pigott's name and stated that he had spoken to him in reference to his fall, his repentance and his desire to come back amongst us. He also stated a few things that Mr Pigott had related to him. It followed that the church sympathized, but as yet could not fully receive him.

Nearly four years later brother Robert, who had frequently preached at Block Green, had also 'blotted his copy-book' for the Minute Book says, on 26th April 1874:

Mr. Robert Pigott of Swindon no longer considered a satisfactory preacher and would not be asked to preach any more.

It is a pity that Robert's memoirs make no mention of this affair, or of his brother's fall from grace. What had gone wrong? Was it a matter of doctrinal hair-splitting or perhaps a clash of personalities?

In June 1874, three years after John had moved to Filkins, a special meeting was convened to enquire into Mrs. Sarah Pigott's 'long absence from chapel gatherings.' She had sent a note saying that 'she had lately been confined, that her child was not well and that she was therefore unable to attend in person.' Her husband was also before the meeting asking, once again, to be received back into the church.

In view of the treatment meted out to brother Robert two months earlier surely John must have known that he was 'on a hiding to nothing.' Needless to say he was rejected but, once again, there is no attempt to spell out his offence.

Having regard to the six miles which separated Filkins and Faringdon and Sarah's family responsibilities one can only marvel at the impertinence of this enquiry. How could John have brought himself to grovel before his

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wife's inquisitors and ask for reinstatement? How did Hugh and Miriam react to the affair? With hindsight we should perhaps content ourselves with the opinion that in a matter involving the virtual 'excommunication' of three of its members the Chapel should have ensured that its minutes were more specific and balanced. As it is the elders of the Chapel, and John Pigott, are shown in a very unfavourable light. But they were accountable to nobody but themselves and there was no higher authority to whom appeal could be made. It comes as no surprise to find that John transferred his allegiance to Alvescot Chapel, a mere two and a half miles from his home.

Services at Alvescot were held only once a fortnight. Emma Jane tells us how she and her sisters would walk there accompanied by her father and Mr Cook, William Hazel and John Lock who also lived in Filkins.

There was a morning service and another in the afternoon but no service in the evening as many members of the congregation came from a distance and liked to reach home before nightfall.

Each family took their own eatables for lunch, ours being cold meat sandwiches, jam turnovers and apple tarts. We partook of luncheon in the Chapel itself, there being no other place for it, the members remaining in their pews during the meal. Cups of tee could be obtained at the lower end of the Chapel under the gallery, brewed in a large urn. Mother always wrapped up the provisions in linen serviettes, one for each of us, which we spread over our Sunday frocks. The act of disposing of our viands was very properly and quietly performed, as befitted the sanctity of the building, after we had sung the grace, 'For mercies countless as the sands.'

After luncheon we were released and all the young folk rambled off into the meadows, passing the time between lunch and the afternoon service. I remember the first barberries I ever picked were taken from an overhanging branch in a hedge that skirted one of the field-paths near the old parish church.

It was a sight to see the numerous vehicles lined up outside the Chapel, under the wall. The horses were stabled, fed and watered at the Plough Inn opposite and there was a busy scene when they were brought out and re-harnessed when the congregation all left for home.

On alternate Sundays John conducted a simple service in his sitting-room, the congregation consisting of his family and the few Baptists who lived in Filkins.

Triss and I played the hymn-tunes, in turn, on the piano and mother's sweet soprano led the singing while father's rich, deep bass gave balance to the old-time melodies.

Father usually read a sermon from the 'Gospel Standard' and sometimes one of Spurgeon's sermons. It was an orderly and reverent service. When very young Grace and I used to fall asleep during the sermon sitting on our small, folding carpet-chairs, Grace leaning on mother one side and I on the other.

After the service we would gather round the piano to have a sing-song. We always enjoyed these times. Mother led us in soprano, Triss singing alto, father bass as always, Ruth, Grace and I following mother's lead. Triss played as accompanist.

So many of the old

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melodies were known to mother and father, 'Jerusalem', 'Hail smiling morn', 'Oh had I Jubal's lyre', 'Vital Spark', and mother would sing as solos 'Happy be thy dreams', 'He wipes the tear from every eye', 'Larboard Watch', 'Sylvia sleeps' and many other songs.

We loved to listen while she sang for she had a sweet, true voice. She used to lead the singing, when a girl, at a chapel near her home in the days when some chapels disapproved of musical instruments and only permitted a tuning-fork to pitch the note for them'.

It was clearly a loving household. Emma Jane speaks often of her adored mother and of her generous but impulsive father. She recalls the high regard in which he was held by his neighbours and by the ministers of local churches. She remembers with delight the expeditions he led into the beautiful Cotswold country which encircled them, and of his love of wildlife, which must have been the base on which Emma built up her own remarkable botanical knowledge.

There were numerous family pets, Tibby the cat, Trixy the fox terrier, Birdie and Tottie the bantam hens, silkworms numerous and predictably unnamed, and even Nanny the goat who could sometimes be persuaded to pull a tiny, two-seater chaise just large enough for Emma and Grace. This novel 'equipage' had been a present from John and Josiah, the half-brothers who, by 1884, had their own thriving grocery business in Worthing.

Unfortunately outings in the chaise were seldom a success for Nanny's browsing instincts proved too strong for small hands to control. John was reluctantly obliged to sell Nanny and the chaise to the local vicar for the amusement of his two small sons. Emma Jane does not record how the dissenting goat took to the established church!

Emma recalled that in the course of visits to friends in and around the village they were frequently offered home-made wine. Having been brought up by Sarah to be strictly teetotal the girls would always decline while their father would accept. Is it possible that this trivial memory contains just a hint of liberal thinking which, in other matters, had been so repugnant to the elders of the Block Green Chapel?

John's second wife, Sarah, died in 1894. In accordance with her expressed wish she was buried at Kingston Winslow, near Ashbury 'where so many of her own people already rested.' Having read about this, we went in search of this Strict Baptist burial ground. After many enquiries and some unintentional trespassing we eventually found it, tiny, totally neglected and almost completely overgrown by, saplings and bushes.

It seems that the 'cause' at Ashbury must have been a small one for all the visible headstones commemorate members of the Day family of Shrivenham or the related Pounds from the upper mill at Kingston Winslow. Alas, Sarah Pigott's grave is unmarked, as no doubt are others.

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John, a remarkably resilient man, did not remain a widower for long. In 1895 he married Sarah Jane Reeves of South Moreton, near Wallingford, and immediately moved there with his youngest daughter Grace and took up residence at 'Rose Cottage' in the Main Street. When we visited South Moreton in 1982 we identified the house with the aid of photographs taken by Emma Jane's husband, Percy Allen, and found it quite unchanged, at least as far as external appearances are concerned.

Elizabeth Hannah took over the running of the village store in Filkins but she did not retain the postal business. She was assisted by Alice and Emma. But the wind of change was blowing. Alice married a builder named Alex Giles and moved to North London.

In March 1898 Emma herself left home to train as a telegraphist in the Post Office and, in 1913, married Percy Franklin Allen.

In 1899 Elizabeth married Edwin Simkin, a minister in the Primitive Methodist Church. By 1909 they had emigrated to America and made their home in Philadelphia. Grace did not marry and died in 1917.

Great-grandfather died in 1920. His grave in the immaculately-kept burial ground of the South Moreton Strict Baptist Chapel is marked with an inscribed headstone.

SOURCES:

John Pigott's Family Bible

'Happy Heart of Youth' by Emma Jane Allen 1940 (unpublished)

'Memorials of Robert Pigott' 1903

Census Returns for Faringdon and Filkins

Kelly's Directories for Berks., Bucks. and Oxon.

Faringdon Block Green Chapel Book, by courtesy of the Strict Baptist Historical Society