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AGNES BEAUMONT OF EDWORTH

In 1760 Samuel James, the minister of the Tilehouse Street Baptist Church in Hitchin, Herts., published a volume entitled *An Abstract of the Gracious Dealings of God, With several Eminent Christians, in their Conversion and Suffering. Taken from Authentic Manuscripts.* Among these was one which from 1801 was reissued as a popular pamphlet, *The singular Experience and great Sufferings of Mrs Agnes Beaumont, who was born at Edworth . . . as written by herself.* There are two manuscript versions of Agnes Beaumont's text in the British Library, Egerton 2414 and Egerton 2128. Egerton 2414 was chosen as the basis for a scholarly edition published in 1929 in *Constable's Miscellany* by G. B. Harrison, a year after he had published a facsimile reproduction of the first minute book of Bedford's Bunyan Meeting. Both were a result of the revival in the 1920s of scholarly interest in John Bunyan, for Bunyan was very much at the centre of Agnes Beaumont's story.

Today there is increasing interest in Agnes Beaumont herself because of the current concern with the life of women in the past, and the scarcity of autobiographical work by seventeenth-century women, so no doubt soon there will be other editions. G. B. Harrison's introduction indicated as much as was known in 1929 of Agnes and her family and the other characters in her story. Tradition said that she had married twice, the second time to a Mr Storey, 'a person of considerable substance and great seriousness';¹ that she died at Highgate on 28 November 1720, aged 68; and that her body was brought to Hitchin for burial in the Tilehouse Street Meeting House Yard. A stone was set on a wall overlooking the graveyard with the inscription: 'Agnes Beaumont, of Edworth, Bedfordshire (Afterwards Mrs Story) Became a Member of the Church at Bedford. Under the pastoral Care of the Revd John Bunyan, Octr. 31st 1672. Died at Highgate. Novr. 28th 1720, Aged 68 years: And, being brought to Hitchin, by her own desire, was interred in the adjoining Ground. This Stone was erected by Subscription in 1812, in respectful Remembrance of a Person so justly celebrated, for her eminent Piety, and remarkable Sufferings.' It is said that she wished to be buried near the grave of the Revd John Wilson, who appears in her story, and who had been a revered minister of the Tilehouse Street Meeting.

The narrative of her 'singular experience' is brief but dramatic. The events took place in the spring of 1674 within little more than a week at Edworth, a small Bedfordshire village, lying three miles south-east of Biggleswade, near the border with Hertfordshire. The village then consisted of a church, a forge and about eleven farmsteads or cottages. In a small farmhouse (three hearths) lived John Beaumont, senior, a widower, with his younger daughter, Agnes, then aged twenty-one. The two of them lived mainly on the ground floor. The door opened on to the farmyard, with inside the door an entry, and beyond that a hall or living room, out of which opened the bedchamber, holding two beds, where slept both father and daughter. There was also a kitchen. Across the yard from the farmhouse were barns, cowhouses, and a stable, and nearby some hedged closes and a wood. The father,

by then about seventy years old, seems to have already handed over the main part of the leasehold to his eldest son, and contented himself in winter with feeding some cattle in the yard and outhouses. There is no mention of milk or of dairy work. If he had arable, we may assume that it was worked for him by his son's labourers, who certainly thought of him as 'their Old Master'. John Beaumont junior, the elder son, lived in a much larger farmhouse about a field away from the first. John junior had been born about 1639 and in 1661 had married an heiress, Elizabeth Retchford, and by now they had five children, aged between ten years and eighteen months. Their house, of two storeys, was taxed in 1671 for seven hearths.

The members of the Independent Congregation in Bedford, which had been set up during the Commonwealth, came from a wide area, and members and sympathizers would often meet locally. Some local groups evolved in time into separate congregations, as in 1710 at Gamlingay, just over the county border in Cambridgeshire. In 1674 there were already regular meetings at Gamlingay, ministered to by pastors from the Bedford church.² Of the nine surnames of Edworth householders in the 1671 Hearth Tax return, five had members who had been presented at church or civil courts for nonconformity and, where their allegiance is defined, the defaulters attended Gamlingay Meeting.³ At this time in Bedfordshire perhaps less than a quarter of regular attenders at independent church meetings sought full church membership, which involved considerable burdens.⁴ At one time John Beaumont senior had been an attender and sympathizer, and John junior and his wife were attending regularly, but only Agnes had asked for church membership. Her request was recorded in the minutes of a meeting on 31 November 1672, and at the next church meeting full church membership was granted to 'Agniss Behement'. The entry in the first minute book of the Bedford church is in John Bunyan's own hand. In the same village Mary Prudden was also a full member of the church; the house of her husband, George Prudden, was licensed in 1672 for nonconformist worship,⁵ and the church held meetings at Edworth, although there is no evidence that George himself ever became a full member.

This was a time of great spiritual progress for Agnes. 'Many time in A day would the Lord lead me into his banqueting house, and his banner over me was love'; all this time she was expecting some trial or temptation. For several months before her father's death, 'I had great and frequent enjoyments of god; And he was pleased to poure out A spirit of grace and supplication upon me.'

There was to be a church meeting at Gamlingay on Friday, 20 February 1674, and Agnes was extremely anxious, for her elderly father was now often unwilling to let her attend. She told him she would do all her work in the morning and be back again at night. Roads in winter were too deep in mud for walking, and women were seldom able to take a horse for their sole use, especially during the working week. A woman usually rode on horseback perched sideways behind her husband, brother, or man-servant. Agnes was hoping to ride behind Mr John Wilson, who

had said that he would call at her brother's on his way to Gamlingay. Later it became clear that her father disapproved of her devotion to John Bunyan: there is no evidence that he was unhappy at the idea of her travelling with Mr Wilson. John Beaumont junior was to take his wife behind him on his horse. On the Friday Mr Wilson did not appear, the farm horses were all busy in the fields, and Agnes wept with anxiety. Then appeared Mr John Bunyan, also on his way to the meeting at Gamlingay, and he was, with the greatest reluctance, persuaded to take Agnes up behind him. He obviously knew that her father would disapprove, and at first replied, 'If I should cary yow, your father would be greivous Angrey with me'. The rash girl replied, 'If you please to carry me, I will venture that', and at last her brother prevailed on Bunyan 'and I did git vp behind him'.

This may offer the crux of the story, for like so many women before and after, Agnes' enthusiasm for religion seems to have gone hand in hand with an enthusiasm for the man through whom her faith had been mediated. Her father must have feared lest this too public infatuation should blight her chances of a good marriage, virtually the only career open to a middle-class girl. Membership of Bunyan meeting had already limited her choice of husband to an adherent of an approved congregation. As they rode off together, the father heard whom she was with and in a rage ran to pull her off the horse, but he was too late.

Agnes 'began to have high thoughts of my selfe, and proud to thincke I should ride behind such A man as he was; and I was pleased that any body did looke after me as I rode a long. And sometimes he would be speaking to mee About the things of god as we went Along. And indeed I thought my selfe a happy body that day . . . But, as yow will understand, my pride had a fall.'

At Gamlingay Town's End they met 'A priest one Mr Lane whoe, as I remember, lived then at Bedford, but was use to preach at Edworth; and he knew us both, and spake to us, and lookt of us, as wee rode Along the way as if he would have staird his Eyes Out; and afterwards did scandalise us after a base manner, and did raise a very wicked report of us, which was altogether false, blessed be god.' Indeed, her luck was out, for Anthony Lane came of a Bedford family and would have known Bunyan all his life, and was acting as curate at Edworth, so he would have known Edworth gossip about the Beaumont family and the disagreements between Agnes and her father. But Bunyan and Agnes continued through Gamlingay, and 'god made it a blessed meeting to my soul indeed . . .'

After the meeting came the problem of how to get home, for Bunyan was returning by another road. However, a young woman had ridden in from Hinxworth, and she took Agnes back as far as Sister Prudden's gate, and for the last part of the way Agnes waded through the mud 'plosshing through the durt over shoes, haveing no pattings on.' When she got to her father's house, she found the door shut and locked. On previous such occasions, her father had handed her the key through the bedchamber window, but that night he absolutely refused, 'for he was very Angry with me, for rideing behind Mr Bunyan, and said I should never

come within his doores Againe, Except I would promise him to leave goeing after that man.' This she refused to do, and the old man remained adamant, assuming that she would go and sleep at her brother's. However, Agnes decided to spend the night in prayer in the barn, which she did, and it was so cold 'the dirt was frozen upon shoues in the morneing.'

'Soe the morneing came on, and when it was light, I peeked through the Cracks of the barne doore to see when my Father opened the doore.' The old man came out of the house into the yard, locking the door behind him, and putting the key in his pocket, before coming with his fork to fodder the cows in the barn. There he saw Agnes 'with my rideing Cloths on'. Her appeals had no effect - he said she would not be allowed in his house again until she 'would promise him never to goe to A meeting Againe as long as he lived'.

Some of her brother's workmen passed through the yard, and realized she had not been in the house 'for shее hath her rideing cloths on still', and they took the news to their master, who went straight over to try and mediate. His attempts even more enraged the old man. The brother left, and Agnes sat on the doorstep. Her father refused to approach the door while she was there, so to allow him to get out of the cold into his own house, she left and went at last over to her brother's. There she had something to eat, warmed herself, and then went upstairs to a bedchamber to pray. Later she and her sister-in-law went over and tried to reason with her father through the window. He remained adamant, 'only this one thing Hee said, he would never give mee A penny as long as he lived; nor when he dyed, but he would give it to them he never saw before.'

This was indeed a blow. If the only way to set up a middle-class girl in life was by a suitable marriage, such a marriage depended on her having sufficient dowry to attract a man of substance to provide a home and proper support for her and for their children. Her sister, Joan, had had her provision at her marriage, the elder son when he was set up in the main farm, while a second brother, William, had been apprenticed in London and in the father's will would get £200 to set himself up in business. Apart from this legacy, Agnes was the main beneficiary under the will John Beaumont senior had made on 15 August 1670.⁶ Her signature is among those of the witnesses to the will, so she certainly knew its content. If no dowry, then no marriage, so 'my heart began to sinck. Thought I to my selfe "What will be come to mee? to goe to service and worke for my liveing is a new thing to me; and soe young as I am too. What shall I doe?"'

Her father would not even hand out to her through the window her Bible and her pattens, but that evening she decided to go again to him, but by herself, as his rage had been greater when her brother or his wife had been with her. "'And" thought I "now he hath beene Alone one night, and hath noe body to do anything for him, it may be he will let me come in.'" When she got there the door was ajar, the key on the outside, and her father indoors. As she went to go in, the father came through the entry, slammed the door and bolted it on the inside. She put the key in

her pocket, and went behind the house, thinking to go in when her father came out 'to serve the Cowes; for I see they was not served up for all night.' However, he came out to where she stood on a narrow strip between the back of the house and a pond, and 'takes hold of my Arme. "Hussiff" said hee "give me the key quickly, or I will through yow in the Pond."' "

As an argument, this was convincing, so she gave him the key, and wandered out in the fields to a wood-side, where she stayed to weep and pray. That night, Saturday, she was at her brother's, and went with him to the Meeting on the Sunday. The Sunday evening she pleaded again with her father, but he would let her in only if she would 'promise him never to goe to A meeting againe As long as I live.' She wept, but eventually said "Well father, I will promise yow that I will never goe to A meeting Againe, as long as you live, without your Consent".' whereupon he gave her the key and she went in. 'Soe my poore father comes in and was very loveing to mee, And bid me gitt him some supper; which I did.'

That night the brother was surprised she had not returned to his house, and sent a man on an errand, who said that Agnes 'was in the house with their Old master, and he was very Chearfull with her', so the brother knew she had given in. In the morning, his reproaches and the reproaches of her own heart made her fill 'every Corner of the house and yard that day with bitter sighs and groanes and teires.' In the evening, as she and her father sat by the fire, he asked why she was so sad. 'Soe I burst out a Crying "Oh father" said I, "I am soe afflicted to thincke that I should promise yow never to goe to A meeting Againe without your Consent, and the feares that I have least yow should not be willing to let me goe . . ." And he wept like a child. "Well, dont let that trouble yow" said hee, "we shall not disagree."' Later in the evening 'it was my rideing behind John Bunyan, he said, that vext him; for that enemy in the towne [i.e. in Edworth] had often been in Censing him Against Mr Bunyan, though sometime before my father had heard him preach gods word, and heard him with a broaken heart as he had done severall others . . . But that evill minded man in the towne would set him against the meetings. I have stood and heard him say to my father, "Have you lived to these yeares to be led away with them? These be they that lead silly women Captive into houses, and for A pretence make long prayers"; and soe never leave till he had set him Against me and the meetings; and would I suppose Counsell him not to let me goe.'

On the Monday she spent the day 'in praying and Crying to god in Corners, unless it was to doe my worke about house, and gitt my father his dinner. And he did eate as good A dinner as ever I see him eate.' In the evening it was cold, and her father said they would not sit up too long. 'He, when the nights ware long, would sitt upp with me A candle's burneing, as I have satt A spinning or at other worke . . . Soe after Supper, as he sat by the fyre, he tooke A pipe of Tobacco. And when he had done, he bid me take up the Coales and warme his bed; which I did.' Having used the warming pan, and seen him to bed, she went out to the

kitchen. When her father was asleep 'he used to snore soe in his sleepe that one might heare him all over the house'; on such occasions she often remained sitting up by the fire, praying. When at last she went into the bedchamber to her bed, he was asleep.

She was awakened by her father. "Father", said I "are you not well?" . . . said he "I was strucke with A paine at my heart in my sleepe; I shall dye presently." She put on her petticoats and shoes, and lit a candle. He would not let her go for help, but dressed himself and sat in his chair by the fire in the Hall. She made a hot drink, of which he drank a little, then fell unconscious. When he recovered he went to the bedchamber to his close-stool, but on going to see how he was, she found him senseless on the ground. She rushed out to get her brother, but there was now thick snow, and without her stockings her shoes were loose and filled up with snow, which hampered her, but she got through to the big house, and called her brother from below his bedroom window. When her brother and two or three of his menservants reached the house, the old man had managed to climb back on his bed, but died very soon after.

Neighbours arrived, and among them the 'enemy in the towne'. 'Came Mr Fary and his Sonn, who soe soone as they came in house, asked if my father was departed; and somebody tould him yeas. An he Answered it was noe more then he lookt for.'

That day was Tuesday, a Baldock fair day, where the Mr Lane who had seen Agnes and John Bunyan at Gamlingay Town's End the previous Friday, spread various stories about the two. 'And, as I hard, it ran from one End of the fair to the other presently.' Agnes and her brother sent word to friends and relations that the funeral would be on the Thursday, but on Wednesday night Mr Feery sent for her brother, who went and found him in his parlour. Said Feery, "Doe yow thincke your father dyed A naturall death?" My Brother was amased to heare him Aske such a question; But he Answered and said, "I know he did dye A naturall death." "But" said he to my Brother "I beleeve he did not; . . . I beleeve your Sister poysoned him." Mr Feery said that as John Beaumont was a parish officer, he must do his duty and send for Mr Halfhead of Potton, a doctor and surgeon, and so they had to postpone the funeral. Mr Halfhead came, enquired about her father's last hours, and told Mr Feery that the death was natural and there were no grounds for his suspicions. However, Mr Feery was not convinced, and so Agnes' brother had to send for the Coroner, and the next day the Coroner and his jury rode over from Bedford. Agnes heard that 'Mr Feery said that I made A hand of my father, and John Bunyan gave me Counsell to poyson him when he Caried me behind him to Gamgy; That then we did consent to do it. Nay, as I remember, it was said that Mr Bunyan gave me stuff to do it with.'

The Coroner and the jury put up their horses at her brother's, and came over to view her father's body, laid out on his own bed, and they passed her sitting by the fire. The formal meeting was at her brother's, who had to send twice to Mr Feery

before the latter appeared. Mr Feery's suspicions were apparently based on the fact that Agnes had been shut out for two nights over the weekend before the old man's death. 'At last the Coroner was very Angry. And bid him stand bye, if their was all he could say.' Agnes told her story of the last five days of her father's life, and the jury must have given a verdict of death by natural causes. The Coroner then said to Mr Feery that, since he had defamed the maid, it was his business to go about to clear her name. Indeed, as he had tried to take away her life, £500 would not be amends enough for the damage he had done her. To Agnes the Coroner said, "Come, Sweetheart . . . doe not be daunted, god will take Care of thy preferment, and Provide the A husband, notwithstanding the malice of this man."

The funeral was held on the Saturday, but even then Mr Feery had not finished his mischief-making, 'for he sent for my brother in law, that had Married my owne Sister, from my Father's grave, and tould him how things was left As to my father's will, And that my father had given her but A shilling to Cutt her off. And he tould him he Could set him in the way to Come in for a part, which my brother was glad to heare of.' Since a law suit was threatened, Agnes gave him £60 out of her eventual inheritance.

The cause of so much of Agnes' troubles at last appear to emerge: why Mr Feery had set her father against her, why he had accused her of poisoning her father, why he caused trouble with her brother-in-law. The old man's will had been made four years before his death, 'and Mr Feery made it. And then he put my father on to give me more then my Sister because of some designs he had then, but afterwards when I came to go to meetings, he was turned Against me.' He had evidently thought that Agnes would make a suitable wife for his own son, Thomas Feery, five years older than Agnes and still unmarried (Peter Feery's own wife, Eleanor, did not die until 1685).

Rumours continued in the neighbourhood, and a month later it was reported at Biggleswade that Agnes had now confessed to poisoning her father and that she was 'quite distracted' or mad. So the next market day she went to Biggleswade and went to Sister Everard's (presumably a fellow attender at the Gamlingay Meeting), and later walked through the market, 'soe a great many came to me and said "We see yow are not distracted". And I see some Crye, and some laugh.'

At the end of the manuscript in Egerton 2128 there is a note of a rumour elsewhere in the country that Bunyan was a widower and gave her the poison for her father so that they might marry, followed by a further note that the next year, when there was a fire at Edworth, Mr Feery said that Agnes had caused it.

Undoubtedly this local scandal helped make John Bunyan insert in the fifth edition of his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, published in 1680, several new paragraphs, being a vigorous defence against rumours that he, John Bunyan, 'had my Misses my Whores, my Bastards, yea, two wives at once, and the like', and he went on to declare that 'If all the Fornicators and Adulterers in England were hang'd by the Neck till they be dead, *John Bunyan*,

the object of their Envie, would be still alive and well.' Of all the actors in the drama, however, little is left to be discovered about Bunyan, whereas very little is known about any of the others.

The Beaumonts were a yeoman family that flourished in east Bedfordshire from the reign of Elizabeth I. They seem to have originated in Hertfordshire. Agnes' grandfather, John Beaumont of Southill, had a large family, of whom John (Agnes' father) the first child by his second wife, was born in Southill about 1615.⁷ There is an entry in 1637 in the Edworth burial register 'an unknown passenger [traveller] who dyed at Beamonts', which might show that John was already living in the parish. Certainly he married Mary Peakes at Edworth on 7 June 1638. She was buried in 1662, and four children of the marriage survived infancy. The eldest was John, born about 1639, who married the heiress, Elizabeth Retchford, at Edworth in 1661. No doubt with the help of his wife's dowry, he was able to occupy the largest house in the village by the time of the 1671 Hearth Tax. Then, after two boys and a girl had died as infants, Joan was baptized at Edworth on 22 March 1646. Agnes' only surviving sister, Joan, was already married by August 1670 when her father made his will. No clue has been found as to the name of her husband. Next a son, William, was baptized on 16 October 1650. He went to London and became a vintner; his body was sent back to Edworth for burial in 1720. Agnes was the youngest, baptized on 1 September 1652.

The evidence might suggest that Agnes and her father lived in a single storey house, but when her brother came to tell her of Mr Feery's suspicions and therefore the need for an inquest, Agnes records: 'Soe the next morneing my Brother Comes early, and with A very sad Countenance Calls me upp Staires. "Sister", said hee, "I must speake with yow." Soe I went up with him into the Chamber, and when hee Came upp, he fell A weeping.' This is the only mention of an upper floor, but the house in Edworth traditionally said to be hers and her father's has two storeys.⁸

It is clear that Agnes and her father had neither indoor nor outdoor servants, and such work as was needed in February was done by the old man, which consisted of foddering morning and night the cows in the yard. Agnes did not work outside, but was expected to 'doe my worke about the house, and gitt my father his dinner'. Pehr Kalm, the Swedish agriculturist, who visited Bedfordshire in the 1740s, marvelled at the easy life of the farmer's wives and daughters there compared with Sweden, where they seem to have been the work-horses both in and out of doors. Kalm said that in Bedfordshire the wives did little but the cleaning (they were admittedly very strict about cleanliness) and the cooking, although he allowed they were excellent cooks.⁹ The details of Agnes' clothing are of interest: she had special riding clothes, her pattens (which kept her shoes high out of the mud) were essential in winter, her shoes without her thick winter stockings were far too big and fell off in the snow.

Agnes' brother, John, and his wife were faithful attenders at meetings of the Gamlingay congregation, and John was even more eager than Agnes herself that she

should not give way to her father over attendance at meetings. John's later life seems to echo that of his father, for at the death of his eldest son, Thomas, in June 1730, it was noted in the Edworth burial register that Thomas had been a 'farmer, who had been about 43 years in the best farm'. That would go back to 1687, when Thomas had married Elizabeth Crouch, and it would seem that on marriage the eldest son again took over the main leasehold property held by the family.

What can be discovered of other people mentioned in the narrative? The Potton physician and surgeon, Mr Edmund Halfhead or Halfhyde, came from a family long established on the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire borders, and his children were described as gentry. Edmund himself died at Potton in 1691, having been working there since at least 1654. His good sense comes through in Agnes' story.

Mr Anthony Lane, the gossiping parson, was admitted sizar at Jesus College, Cambridge, in 1662, described as 'of Bedfordshire'. He took his degree and was ordained priest in 1670.¹⁰ The only Lane families in the county with substantial houses were in Bedford, and the Bedford Grammar School was the only school locally to prepare boys for the universities, so he was probably a son of one of these Bedford Lane families. In the town in 1671 we have William Lane in St Paul's parish with four hearths; he had been mayor in 1670. Another Mr William Lane had been buried in January 1668. As Anthony's only son was called William, these could well be his brother and father. Anthony Lane married Mary Crofts at Bedford St Paul's Church on 21 August 1670. The Crofts were another prosperous burgher family, and neither the Lanes nor the Crofts produced a single member for Bunyan Meeting. Unfortunately the baptism or birth registers of four of the five Bedford parish churches are more or less defective for the Civil War and Commonwealth period, so it is not possible to identify the couples' parents. Anthony would have grown up in Bedford during the Commonwealth, when loyal members of the Church of England met with persecution and, in a town of about 2,130 inhabitants, he must have seen and known about John Bunyan. Lane worked as curate at Willian in Hertfordshire, was minister at Langford (which adjoins Edworth on the west) between 1669 and 1676, and curate at Edworth.¹¹ His son, William, was baptized and buried in Langford in 1673, and daughters were baptized in Willian in 1671 and at Bedford St John in September 1676, where Anthony himself was buried in October of the same year.

Of most importance to this story are the Feery family, without whom, though Agnes might have quarrelled with her father and he might have died a few days later, there would have been no false accusations and no inquest. The main mover behind these scenes was Peter Feery or Feary. When buried at Edworth on 27 January 1692, he was described as a yeoman, and the entry continues, 'who came a traveling day labourer to this parish and threshed in the parsonage Barn'. So he came from a lower level of society than the Beaumonts, but as a yeoman, an owner of his land, he would eventually have ranked higher than them, for they remained tenant farmers. His will indicates considerable wealth and a generous disposition,

for he left twenty shillings to every cottage house in Edworth, and to every hired servant living in the said town two shillings each. He was being looked after by a niece, Elizabeth, to whom he left all his leasehold property in Steeple Morden, Cambridgeshire. Going through the list of small legacies, it is clear that he had had two brothers, Thomas and John.¹² The only place locally where there is evidence for brothers, Thomas, John and Peter, being baptized is at Swineshead, then in Huntingdonshire, now in Bedfordshire, where the three sons of Thomas Farre (Feery or Feary) were baptized, Thomas in 1614, John in 1617, and Peter in 1620. These are the only entries for the family in the Swineshead parish register.

Peter Feery's wife was Eleanor or Helen. They were married by 1647 and she predeceased her husband, dying in 1685. Three children are known: Thomas, baptized at Edworth in 1647, Ann, baptized at Edworth in 1649, and Elizabeth, baptized and buried at Astwick (a neighbouring village) in 1657. Peter could well have thought that Agnes would make a suitable wife for his son. Thomas would have made a suitable husband, for his father left him estates in Wroxhill in Marston Moretaine, and an estate in Millo and Newton in the parish of Dunton. Did Peter Feery help Agnes' father draft his will? This seems likely, for Peter's own will contained the unusual phrase, 'I commend My spiritual soul through faith in Jesus Christ my redeemer to my heavenly Father that gave it me.' John Beaumont's will contains the phrase, 'I desire and believe that my spirittuall soule may and shall returne to God My Creator that gave it mee.' John Beaumont, the father, made his will in 1670, four years before his death, yet signed with a mark, suggesting that he was unable to write. The witnesses were Peter Feery, Thomas Feery and 'Ann Beamovent'.¹³ The handwriting of the text of the will most resembles that of Peter Feery, though handwriting evidence suggests that Thomas Feery wrote other Edworth wills later in the century. Perhaps he had had some training as a lawyer.

Agnes' account shows the coroner to have been a man of good sense and considerable kindness. Might he have been sympathetic to Bunyan and the sectaries? There were two coroners in the county that year, Charles Dymoke of Cranfield and Thomas Paley of Bedford. As Agnes' brother sent to Bedford, it was presumably to summon Thomas Paley.¹⁴ The Paley family, like the Lanes, were prosperous Bedford burgesses in the seventeenth century, staunch parishioners of Bedford St Mary, whose rector, Giles Thorne, was incarcerated in the Fleet prison from 1642 to 1647 for his Anglican convictions. Thomas' father, William Paley, who died in 1652, had been mayor in 1643 and then alderman. Thomas himself, born in 1616, was active as a burgess on the Common Council from 1647 to 1650, but then disappears completely from the minutes of this strongly Parliamentary borough until the Restoration in 1660.¹⁵ During the Commonwealth, Major-General William Boteler, who administered Bedford for Cromwell, listed in 1655 'suspected' persons in Bedfordshire, that is, people suspected of being inimical to the Commonwealth, and among them is Thomas Paley, apothecary. Twelve years earlier, in 1643, the Quartermaster and 'Chirurgion' of the regiment of the leading

Bedfordshire royalist, Sir Lewis Dyve, was Thomas Paley of Bedfordshire, and so his background was royalist and Anglican.¹⁶ In the 1671 Hearth Tax, Thomas had a large house in Bedford St Paul's, with six hearths. Following the family tradition, he was mayor. In 1675 there is a record of a boy apprenticed to Thomas Paley, apothecary and alderman.¹⁷ He held the position of coroner for some years. As he too was a medical man, his professional experience would reinforce Mr Halfhead's view that John Beaumont's death was natural. It is clear that, though he had no reason to favour dissenters, his good sense left his judgment unclouded. He comes out of the whole episode better than any of the other main actors.

Until recently, nothing more was known of Agnes' life until the reports of her burial. Where did she live? From similar cases, she might have been expected to have made a home with a brother or sister. She would have had no sympathy with her sister, but probably remained with John and his wife, with whom she seemed to agree well. They eventually had a family of at least twelve children, five dying in infancy, and help is always welcome in such a household. The next child born after the old man's death, baptized at Edworth on 17 December 1676, was named Agnes.

Mr John Wilson of Bedford, whose failure to call at Edworth was the cause of Agnes' 'singular experience and great sufferings', was an early member of the Bedford Meeting, joining in 1656, when the congregation was using St John's Church in Bedford. In 1669, when he was away from Bedford, the congregation sent to him and to others 'certaine letters for their comfort and edification'. In 1674 the Hitchin Congregation, later known as the Tilehouse Street Baptist Church, asked the Bedford Meeting to allow Brother Wilson to be transferred to them, as they wished to use him as an officer in the church, and in 1677 John Wilson was appointed pastor there. It is clear that Agnes transferred some of her loyalty thenceforth to the Hitchin Meeting. In 1692 the members built a meeting house, and the lists of subscribers are divided 'From London' and 'In the Country'. Among the country donors listed in May 1692 'Agnes Beamont' appears three times, contributing ten, fifteen and ten shillings, so she was presumably still living locally.¹⁸

The next piece of evidence is a marriage at Cheshunt in Hertfordshire on 14 October 1702 of Agnes Beamont, then aged fifty, and Thomas Warren, widower, apparently childless, then aged about seventy. He too was a dissenter. His first marriage had been at Waltham Holy Cross (Waltham Abbey), for in the parish register there is the record of a civil marriage on 12 October 1654 between Thomas Warren, flaxman, and Sarah Almond, spinster, both of that parish.¹⁹ He and his wife were several times presented by the parish constables for refusing to attend the parish church, Thomas being described as yeoman in 1674, and as a grocer in 1675.²⁰ There were congregations of Baptists in Cheshunt from the end of the seventeenth century, and also at Waltham Abbey. Thomas had moved to Cheshunt by at least 1700, when the Waltham Abbey parish register records the burial on 22

July of Sarah, 'wife to Thomas Warren from Cheshunt'.

Thomas Warren was prosperous and in his will, made 21 May 1706, he is described as a gentleman.²¹ He required his executors to sell all his real and personal estate, and bequeathed to his 'loving wife Agnes' £250, in lieu of her right of dower and thirds, and she was to have the furniture of her chamber and 'to have her liveing in my now dwelling house or receive the Rents and Profitts of the house orchard and grounds in my possession'. He set out many legacies, some of them to other members of the Warren family. However, there is a legacy of £100 to Mr Joseph Masters and, if he should have died before the testator, to his children. Joseph Masters, educated at Oxford but leaving without a degree because of his nonconformity, was recognized as the pastor of the Baptists in the Cheshunt area until his death in 1717, though in 1699 he had accepted the pastoral oversight of a large Baptist church meeting in Joiners' Hall, Thames Street, London, with the proviso that he could still pay a monthly visit to his flock at Cheshunt.²²

Thomas was not without his peculiarities. He required his executors within six months of his death to 'build a Tombe in the midst of Waltham Abby Churchyard near the footpath six foot long and three foot wide or thereabouts with brick and lay a faire stone thereon', and he bequeathed five roods of meadow in Waltham Abbey parish to a James Leg, 'Upon condition that he . . . doe and shall from time to time and at all times when and as often as need shall be and require repaire and make good the tombe I do by this my will order myn executors to build for me in the midst of Waltham Church Yard.' He had a number of books, for he left to Abigail, wife of his cousin, Thomas Woolhead, a silver can and six books of her choice. His executors, his cousin Thomas Woolhead senior and Thomas Woolhead junior, were to pay his wife an additional £50, if his estate should allow. However, in a codicil made 31 March 1707, because God had inflicted him with 'sickness and Infirmities which has been very chargeable to me' he reduced some of his bequests, the one to Mr Masters being now £80. In a second codicil of 31 May 1707 he added to his wife's bequest his silver watch, his silver tankard, and a little silver cup with two ears. The Waltham Abbey register records the burial of Thomas Warren from Cheshunt on 5 September 1707, and the will was proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury on 23 September 1707.

Agnes' first surviving signature was as witness to the signing of her father's will. In August 1708 she joined with her husband's executors to sell for £295 the house where she and Thomas Warren had lived, leaving a second signature. The Woolheads were both tallow chandlers of London, and with the agreement of the three main beneficiaries, two being Agnes and Mr Joseph Masters, they conveyed to Zachary Tovey, a mariner of Rotherhithe in Surrey, a freehold messuage in Crossbrook *alias* Carbuncle Street in Cheshunt, Herts., fronting the highroad on the east, with barn and outhouses and a small close. This had been occupied by Thomas Warren, who had added to and improved the premises, which were at the time in the possession of Agnes.²³

Agnes and Thomas Warren had doubtless been brought together by friends or acquaintances in the dissenting churches of that part of Hertfordshire, and probably similar contacts brought her into the circle of Samuel Storey, whom she married on 2 September 1708 at All Hallows Church, London Wall. Both the Woolheads lived in London, as did Joseph Masters and her brother, William Beaumont the vintner.

Again she married a widower and a dissenter, but this time she predeceased him. Samuel Storey's will, made in July and proved in December 1723, left his burial place to the discretion of his executor, and his charitable donations were restricted to £5 to the poor of Highgate in Hornsey parish. He described himself as a citizen and fishmonger of London, and clearly had considerable property and a large family by his first marriage. His eldest son was Samuel, and there were also sons Joseph and George and daughters Jane, Ann, Mary, Katherine and Martha. He had a house in Highgate which he had built on an estate purchased of Rees Gwyn next Hornsey Lane. It is described as a new brick messuage or tenement at the upper corner of the land, and next adjoining to the high road, with a shop, stable, garden, yard and water supply. He also mentioned his present dwelling house, summer house, garden and all outhouses in Hornsey Lane in Highgate, which he held from the Bishop of London, and this he left, with all its furnishings, personal goods and linen, to Joseph. He stated that all his children, except Martha, had attained the age of twenty-one and were married, and that he had already set them up in the world. He seems, however, to have had a very low opinion of all except Joseph, for he left property in trust to George (probably from dislike of George's 'reputed wife'), Samuel and Ann, the capital to go to their children, or in default back to Joseph. To his daughter, Katherine Jevon, he left £20 for clothes, 'she having had none from me when she married without my knowledge or consent', and Martha was to have £800 in South Sea stock and £200 and £50 left her by her mother, no doubt as her dowry.²⁴ It would appear that Samuel Storey was not an easy man to please. Since neither Thomas Warren nor Samuel Storey left any legacy, memento or keepsake to any relation of Agnes, she was probably not by then very close to the surviving members of her own family.

The clue to Samuel Storey's religious opinions comes in a legacy of £5 'to my dear and loving Pastor and Minister of Christ, Mr William Tong'. Tong was a noted nonconformist preacher who from 1702 was pastor of the Presbyterian church which met in Salters' Hall, Cannon Street, and had a large congregation of London's wealthier dissenters. Though his own views as regards church discipline were Presbyterian, yet he agreed very well with the Independents.²⁵

Before Agnes' first marriage she probably remained with her brother, John, and his family. No marriage has been traced for the second brother, William, so he might have needed a housekeeper, but had Agnes been in London in 1692 her name would have been among those 'From London' in the Hitchin meeting house subscription list.

Why did her first marriage come so late in life? Marriage and children were

clearly the career she had expected and hoped for. Even after giving £60 to her brother-in-law, her own legacy should have been amply sufficient as a dowry, at least as much as her sister's. Perhaps her poor father's fears proved true and her behaviour in this episode, widely publicised, discouraged any acceptable suitor while she was still young enough to have children. Perhaps by the time she had reached fifty the local gossip connecting her with John Bunyan and John Wilson merely indicated her unimpeachable dissenting orthodoxy. By then, too, copies of her narrative would have been in circulation in manuscript. It reads as though written by a young person, though considerably more than a year must have passed, because she says of the coroner's jury, 'And I heard that A Twelvemonth after they would speake of me with teires'. Egerton 2128 states that the text was 'Taken from a Coppy Transcribed from a M.S.S. in the hands of Mrs Kenwrick at Bavant [*sic*] in Hampshire', so there were several copies made. Of the two signatures, that on her father's will is printed and extremely neat, 'Ann Beamovent', the *u* written as *v*. On the sale of August 1708 her signature, 'Agnes Warren', is not in as fluent a hand as the signatures of the two Woolheads, but that could well be a difficulty with the surface of the parchment or the state of the quill pen. There is nothing in either to suggest that she penned Egerton 2414, which is in a fluent, practised hand.

Some readers will feel for her father, whose wife had died, leaving him with a headstrong young daughter acting so indiscreetly as to wreck her chances of a good marriage. Some will feel for Agnes, driven by a vision of God and devotion to the preacher through whom she had gained this vision. John Beaumont junior does not come out well. It was he who over-persuaded the reluctant Bunyan to take Agnes with him on his horse; and, though he was not himself bound by the obligations of a full church member, he did his best to keep Agnes at odds with their father over her own church commitment. A past orthodoxy read Agnes' narrative as a tale of a young girl meeting persecution for her faith. Today's orthodoxy sees her as helped by a radical faith to defy a patriarchal society. Neither explanation seems quite to fit the facts.

NOTES

Two series of publications provided much of the material for this study. The first are those of the *Bedfordshire Historical Record Society (BHRS)*; the two volumes most used are vol.16 'The rural Population of Bedfordshire 1671 to 1921' by Lydia M. Marshall, which includes a full edition of the Hearth Tax Return of 1671, and vol.55, 'The Minutes of the First Independent Church (now Bunyan Meeting) at Bedford 1656-1766', edited by H. G. Tibbutt. These two will not be referred to individually each time they are used. The other is the *Bedfordshire Parish Register Series (BPRS)* in which the registers of all parishes in present-day Bedfordshire, and also of some parishes now in adjoining counties, have been published. *BPRS* volumes will not be mentioned individually, but those most used are 26 Astwick, 1 Bedford St Cuthbert and Bedford St John, 35 Bedford St Mary, 58 Bedford St Paul, 40 Bedford St Peter. 30 Biggleswade, 2 Edworth, 70 Langford, 61 Potten, and 7 Swineshead.

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| <p>1 Samuel James, <i>An Abstract of the Gracious Dealings of God, With several Eminent Christians</i>, Hitchin 1760, footnote p.128.</p> <p>2 <i>BHRS</i> vol.55.</p> | <p>3 Bedfordshire County Record Office (hereafter BCRO) bound typescript, 'Protestant Nonconformists and Roman Catholic Recusants in the County of Bedford 1660-1689', by</p> |
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- W. M. Wigfield, n.d.
- 4 Patricia Bell, 'John Bunyan and Bedfordshire', in *The John Bunyan Lectures, 1978*, published by the Bedfordshire Education Service, 1978, pp.37-9.
 - 5 *State Papers (Domestic) Charles II*, 321 no.225: Receipts for licences issued under the Declaration of Indulgence, 1672.
 - 6 Public Record Office (hereafter PRO) Prob 10/1058 will of John Beaumont senior, made 15 August 1670, proved 30 May 1674.
 - 7 *The Beaumont Family* by Allene Beaumont Duty and John Erwin Beaumont, Cleveland, Ohio, 1980. Published by Xerox Reproduction Center, 1231 Superior Avenue, Cleveland, Ohio 44114. This study used work at the PRO by Mr C. W. Brand, a professional genealogist. On p.181 is an account of the Beaumonts of Edworth, though there is an error. Joan, baptized at Edworth in 1646, is stated to have married in 1687 Henry Peacock. This is a misreading for a marriage of a Joan Beaumont in 1637.
 - 8 *The Bedfordshire Magazine*, vol.6, Autumn 1958, p.199.
 - 9 Pehr Kalm, *Account of a visit to England on his way to America in 1748*, translated by Joseph Lucas, 1892.
 - 10 Venn, *Alumni Cantabrigiensis*, Cambridge 1924.
 - 11 BCRO Bishop's Register Transcripts: ABT Edworth, Lane signs as curate in 1669 and in 1675; ABT Langford, Lane signs as minister, vicar or curate between 1670 and 1676.
 - 12 BCRO ABP/W 1691/141 will of Peter Feery, made 21 June 1691, proved 6 November 1691.
 - 13 See no.6 above.
 - 14 BCRO HSA W 1674 1. Calendarium Comitatus among Assize papers.
 - 15 *BHRS* vol.26, 'The Minute Book of Bedford Corporation 1647-1664', edited by Guy Parsloe.
 - 16 *BHRS* vol.27 'The Life and Letters of Sir Lewis Dyve 1599-1669', by H. G. Tibbutt.
 - 17 Bedford Borough Records (at Bedford Town Hall) C 1/2 Register of Apprentices.
 - 18 First surviving minute book of the Hitchin Tilehouse Street Baptist Church, which in 1990 was in the custody of the minister, the Revd L. H. J. Waugh.
 - 19 Essex Record Office: D/P 75/1/5,6.
 - 20 Essex Record Office: Assize Records files 35/111/3 no.25; 35/115/3 no.12; Quarter Sessions file 443 no.28.
 - 21 PRO Prob 11/496 will of Thomas Warren, made 21 May 1706, codicils 31 March and 31 May 1707, proved 23 September 1707.
 - 22 William Urwick, *Memorials of Nonconformity in Hertfordshire*, 1884, pp.507-8.
 - 23 Hertfordshire Record Office, 80040-1.
 - 24 PRO Prob 11/591 will of Samuel Storey, made 1 July and proved 24 December 1723.
 - 25 *Dictionary of National Biography*.

PATRICIA L. BELL *Sometime County Archivist, County of Bedford*

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Volumes XXIII and XXIV of the Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal have recently appeared under the editorial direction of Joshua Thompson. They contain not only his history of the Irish College (in two parts), together with a list of students, but also broader articles dealing with 'Liberty of Conscience', and 'The Theology of the Child'. We are also told that a history of the Irish Union exists in draft form ready for publication in the centenary year of 1995. (Further details from the Baptist Union of Ireland, 117 Lisburn Road, Belfast, BT9 7AF).

T. W. Handy's 'Note on Early Baptists at Hurst Farm, Stoke upon Trent (Trans. Salop. Archaeological Society, LIX, 1989, pp.48-52) throws light on early Baptist witness not only in Shropshire but also Cheshire.

JHYB