

A BIT OF GOSSIP ON A RUISLIP BIRTH

by Melanie Winterbotham

Giving birth in the early 1700s was risky, but rarely lonely. When Mary Saech¹, a Quaker, gave birth to her first child, John, in 1706 (see Figure 1 below), she was accompanied by four neighbours as well as a midwife. The midwife was Isabella Cowdery, who lived in Uxbridge and attended confinements in several surrounding villages; she was married to a tallow chandler and 'clerk'.²

Women who assisted at a birth were earlier known as 'godsibs', strictly meaning a godparent or close relative. Considering the length of time a woman might be in labour, it is not surprising that they indulged in what we now call gossip! Gossiping at Mary's house were Dorothy Nicholas, Elizabeth Redding, Sarah Osman, and Ann Nelham.

Dorothy Nicholas³ attended all three of Mary's labours, and was possibly the wife of Matthew or John Nicholas, both of whom were farmers. Elizabeth Redding was married to Henry Redding, a labourer. There were Osmans farming in Northwood, but Sarah does not appear in records. Ann Nelham⁴ is of interest. Death registers show that the wife of Joseph Nelham was a wet-nurse. Was Ann here to share her expertise in infant handling and feeding? At least one of the women, possibly Elizabeth Redding (who seems to have no children before 1710), is likely to have been a servant.

The house was even more crowded in 1708, when six gossips attended. Dorothy Nicholas and Ann Nelham were accompanied by Mary's sister in law Ann Saech, and by Judith Seamour, Mary Turner and Elizabeth Richardson. Judith Seamour⁵ was married to William Seamour, a baker and shopkeeper, and had ten children herself. Mary Turner may be the wife of Thomas Turner, a 'certificate man', meaning that he did not come from the parish and could only stay if he could support himself; so Mary was probably a servant of some sort. Elizabeth Richardson could be a relative, a servant and/or a fellow Quaker; this surname is not local to Ruislip, but is the name of a founding family of the Uxbridge Friends.

In 1711, Mary gave birth to her third (and last recorded) child Sarah, who sadly died three weeks later. Present were Ann Hedger, Dorothy Nicholas, Elizabeth Reading, Mary Turner, and Mary Gomme. Ann Hedger was an older woman, married to Richard Hedger senior and with grandchildren of her own. Mary Gomme was connected to Mary by religion – her husband John, a labourer of Eascott Lane, is described in the parish register as a Quaker, although strangely his children were baptised at St Martin's.⁶

This rare peek into the birthing chamber is courtesy of the records of the Longford Meeting of the Society of Friends.⁷ Mary was the daughter of John Hunt of Hedgerley, Bucks, but was living in Uxbridge when she married John Saech (son of John), a bricklayer⁸ of Ruislip in 1705. Quaker records of the family end with her death in 1720 at the age of 39.

John Saech's father, also John⁹, was buried in Uxbridge Friends' Burying Ground in 1712 aged 72. Of the babies, little is recorded in either Quaker or Anglican records. It is probably the grandson John who is commemorated on a gravestone opposite the door of the modern church hall at St Martin's 'son of John bricklayer of Great Kingsend' who had lived 20 years in the parish and was in his 45th year.¹⁰ The epitaph reminds us that people did not stay put three hundred years ago. Only half John's life was spent in Ruislip and his mother had come from Hedgerley. The information in Quaker records demonstrates similar patterns for other members.

The Saeches attended meetings at Uxbridge¹¹, which was a satellite of the Longford Monthly Meeting. Uxbridge meetings began at the George Inn (see Figure 2 below) until in the early 1690s a Ruislip bricklayer John Hudson was commissioned to build a meeting house which included a kitchen and two bedrooms (presumably for travelling Friends and speakers). A Ruislip chapman¹² Jonathan Cock was a Trustee. A replacement meeting house was built in 1755; it is said to have been funded partly by a £50 legacy from Hudson, but his will contains no indication of this. Perhaps a surplus from the fund for the first building had been kept and invested.

Like most non-conformists, Quakers suffered badly in the late seventeenth century. In 1683, after a particularly threatening visit by the Justices, it is said that the town officials and other neighbours paid their fines for them. Nevertheless William Tanner was sent to Aylesbury prison for refusing to pay a fine, and died there two years later, aged only 29.

By the eighteenth century, the Uxbridge meeting was attracting fewer members. Considering the distance from Longford, it is not surprising that the Ruislip contingent was small, and ceased in 1720. Attendance seems to have been relaxed, with non-members present at marriages, and families sometimes using the Church of England (and probably other non-conformist congregations whose records are lost). The Saeches seem to have been self-contained, for they are never listed together with other Ruislip friends. Others were more fully involved; all were successful tradesmen.

Quaker families in 17th century Ruislip

Early converts to the Society of Friends were Jonathan Cock and his wife Sarah who registered six children between 1671 and 1680 when Sarah died. Four years later Jonathan married a widow Huldah Pewsey, and we learn that he came originally from High Wycombe where his father was a bodice maker; Huldah was daughter of Joan Hall of Uxbridge. Jonathan evidently prospered, as by 1693 when his daughter Sarah married James Stirredge of Hemel Hempstead; both father and bridegroom were shopkeepers. By 1702¹³ perhaps through contacts in the religious community, he had acquired a Draper's shop in Hampton Wick, where he died in 1708.

John Hudson and John Edsell were present at the marriage of John and Huldah. John Edsell

buried a daughter Mary in 1690, and was himself buried at Uxbridge burying ground in 1720, yet the birth of 'a childe of Jo. Edsill Quaker' is recorded at St Martin's in 1696 (perhaps it did not survive). His widow Ann was buried at St Martin's in 1743, and a probable son John married in Ruislip in 1744.

John Hudson (son of Nathaniel, also a Ruislip bricklayer, and Martha) married Hannah Hookes of Watford in 1680. John had a daughter Martha whose birth is not recorded. Hannah bore four children, all of whom survived, but alas she died bearing the last. The gossips are recorded for her last two, but none of the names are familiar to Ruislip or the surrounding area; did she return to Watford or to a relative's home for her confinements?¹⁴

In 1691 John Hudson returned to Watford to marry Martha Burwell of Leavesden-Woodside; within six months Martha had died. In 1693 he married in Chesham a widow Mary Hellier, daughter of Stephen Belson, husbandman of Had Denham, and his wife Judith. John died in 1696, leaving property at 'Tile kill' in Ruislip and provision for his sons to be apprenticed. As Jonathan Cock had travelled to each marriage and was an overseer of John Hudson's will, a link between the families is likely, perhaps through a marriage where the partner had died.

Three members of the Wheeler family appear only in burial records at Uxbridge: Elizabeth in 1712 (aged 86) and in 1717 her daughter-in-law Alice (aged 60) and son Nathaniel (aged 55, baptised at St Margaret's, Uxbridge in 1661). Robert Shoreditch was a member in the 1690s, and later married Anne Saech (the gossiping aunt); he subsequently ran slave plantations in Jamaica, having no doubt changed his religious allegiance.

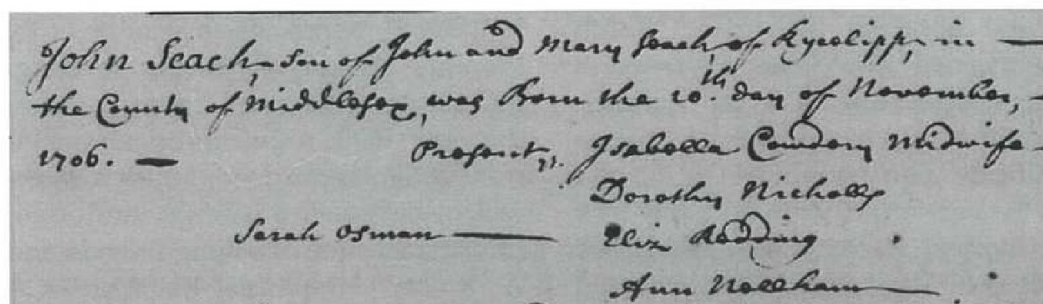


Figure 1 - Birth entry in the Register of Births belonging to the Quakers in and about the Cities of London and Westminster - The National Archives RG6/Piece 498/Folio 272, accessed through The Genealogist.co.uk



THE GEORGE INN.

Figure 2 - The George Inn, Uxbridge, where the early Quakers met.
Engraving from page 516 of *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction ...*
vol. XVIII, publ. J Limbird, London, 1831.

¹ More commonly spelt Saich, but this line are often Saech, even on a gravestone

² Samuel Cowdery was probably clerk of the parish; his son Samuel who died in 1763 is recorded on his gravestone as clerk and sexton of the church of Uxbridge; however his cousin Nathaniel Cowdery who died in 1748 is recorded as 'first clerk of His Majesty's Receipt of Exchequer' [*The history of the ancient town and borough of Uxbridge: containing copies of interesting public documents, and a particular account of all charitable donations* by George Redford, Thomas Hurry Riches; Printed and sold by W. Lake, 1818; published online by Google Books], so this is a bureaucratic family

³ Dorothy Nicholas died 1749 Ruislip

⁴ Ann Knellam died 1757 Ruislip

⁵ Judith Seamour's PCC will was proved in 1744

⁶ In 1705 a Richard Gomme aged 79 was buried at Uxbridge Friends' Burial Ground

⁷ In The National Archives series RG6

⁸ According to *The London Tradesman* by R. Campbell (1747), a Master Bricklayer could build a standard house without consulting an architect, though Campbell considered their skill to be less than that of a mason or carpenter

⁹ John Saech senr. witnessed the wedding in 1705, along with Matthew, James, Ann and Sarah Saech, and two other relatives Samuel and Ruth Wilson

¹⁰ The date on the stone has been damaged

¹¹ Accounts of the Uxbridge meeting can be found in:

The Free Church History of Uxbridge by L. Donald Jarvis, Uxbridge 1953;

The Story of Uxbridge Quakers from 1658 by Celia Trott, Uxbridge Meeting, Society of Friends 1970

The History of Quakers in Uxbridge in <http://leaflettexts.blogspot.co.uk/> accessed 24 Aug 2013; author unnamed

¹² A trader or dealer, often itinerant

¹³ 1702 Marriage of Mary Cock to John Kirton pewterer of St Saviour Southwark, son of John Kirton of Kensington, yeo.

¹⁴ Midwife Dorothy Hall/Holle widow; + Lucie Waler, Mary Carter, Susan Madox, Sarah Swinbanke, Elizabeth Houlden

