

The Fox family of Falmouth

Ann Crichton-Harris February 2018



The Foxes were Quakers. They had been so since the seventeenth century when the Cornish branch of the Society of Friends was first established in Cornwall. This extended family, an important family in the 1800s in terms of mining, trading, shipping, land ownership and philanthropy, was centered in and around Falmouth. That a Quaker family should also be such an epicentre for scientists and inventors can be explained by the demonstrated talents and interests of Robert Were Fox.¹

The Fox's at home

Robert Were Fox,
(the 2nd)
1789 – 1877
and his wife
Maria Barclay
with their son
Barclay



Robert Were Fox was 'a self-governing character', an inventor of note with a particular interest in mining engineering. The family also owned a shipping business, mines, fishing enterprises, steel manufacturing and a surveying business. They were connected by lineage and marriage to a great network of Quakers whose names will be familiar to anyone who has ever lived in England. The great banking houses of Barclays and Lloyds; the chocolate manufacturers - Fry, Cadbury and Rowntree; the firms of Allen and Hanbury, Reckitt and Coleman; Huntley and Palmer the biscuit people, and Abraham Darby of the iron foundry at Coalbrookdale and finally of course, to Elizabeth Fry the great prison reformer who was a cousin of Maria Fox their mother.

He was born in 1789, married Maria Barclay, and lived until 1877 outliving two of his three children. Their children were Anna Maria, Robert and Carolyn. He was a fellow of the Royal Society, and a scientist of distinction, "*His business interests in mining and shipping led to inventions and discoveries in mining engineering, geology and navigation. As a young man he collaborated with another Quaker who lived in Cornwall, Joel Lean, in developing Watt's steam engine and increasing its power by the use of high-pressure steam*".²

My interest in this family stemmed initially from seeing a lovely photo of the oldest daughter, Anna Maria Fox (b. 1816), that hung in my grandmother's bedroom.

Anna Maria Fox

1816 – 1897

*Framed
photograph
found in
Grandmother Eva's
bedroom*



My grandmother was Eva Christopherson, daughter of the Rector of Falmouth (Rector 1882-1912). Eva as a teenager, and Anna Maria as then an old lady, overlapped as neighbours in Woodlane Terrace, Falmouth by thirteen years. Eva's son, my uncle Peter Carveth Harris, told me the two had been friends.



The Rectory on Woodlane Terrace

The family home of Canon Brian Christopherson,
Rector of Falmouth 1882 - 1912

The Fox family was neighbourly and sociable. The youngsters were encouraged to keep journals which, happily for us, give a detailed account of life in the county in the early to mid-eighteen hundred. While both Caroline's and Barclay's journals have been published, Anna Maria's has not been found and regrettably, the family so purged Caroline's of the more personal details that it is not as personally informative as her brother's.

Robert Barclay Fox
1817 – 1855

*Kept his journal
from 1832 - 1854*



Caroline Fox
1819 - 1871

*Kept her journal
from 1835 - 1871*



Barclay's journal, which he started at the age of fourteen, shows an erudite, verbally adept and intelligent boy and one who is affectionate without being overly deferential towards his elders. In short Barclay is bright and he is charming. One would take to him immediately. He could also recognize humbug quickly as his journal demonstrates.

Quakers at that time could not enter university because to do so was contingent upon subscribing to the 39 Articles of Religion, something Quakers declined to do.³ Even a cursory look at the Society of Friends gives rise to the obvious conclusion: the Quakers in England made a proportionally greater contribution to the intellectual and scientific life of the country than that of any other group. That the Foxes were well to-do is true, but they were not as monumentally wealthy as some others in the Society of Friends. They lived at the very end of the country, three days journey in the 1840s from London, yet they travelled about, went up to the City every second year for the most important Yearly Meeting, attended Friends' Meetings elsewhere as well as numerous lectures on every topic - science, medicine and even women's rights.

This Falmouth family was both a magnet for those of scientific distinction and, a model of philanthropy. Their demeanor radiated geniality, simplicity and modesty. In reading these journals I envied this household where visiting eminent scientists at the dining table influenced the youngsters of the family who joined in the conversation, made copious journal notes and remained at table to enjoy the intellectual stimulus that guests had to offer.

And what guests they had - a Who's Who of British intelligentsia! Scientists, poets and explorers found their way to the Fox home in that corner of the country.



Visitors to the Fox House

Tennyson, Wilberforce, Lister, Henry de la Beche, John Lawrence, and Captain Fitzroy of the Beagle, among others...

Alfred, Lord Tennyson came to view the Leonardo sketch of the Last Supper. In 1836 Captain Fitzroy of the Beagle dined with them. Lister, also a Quaker, who developed the modern microscope and was father of the famous surgeon for whom Listerine is named, came to visit. Henry de la Beche, president of the Geographical Society (1847) who had planned to make a geological map of England, a Geological survey finally carried out by the government dined also. William Wilberforce, the great Abolitionist, a particular Quaker interest and so on, dropped in at the Fox home.

Barclay's early journals are peppered with remarks on the beauty of the young women he meets and on the beauty of the countryside. His enjoyment upon entering into a partnership with his father at Penjerrick, that lovely house outside Falmouth, to work as his own and his journal entry showing his excitement at spending his first night there and watching the shaft of moonlight through the bedroom window, is a joy to read.

I was so entranced by the image of Penjerrick that I thought it worth quoting from Ward Lock's guidebook of Falmouth for 1913.

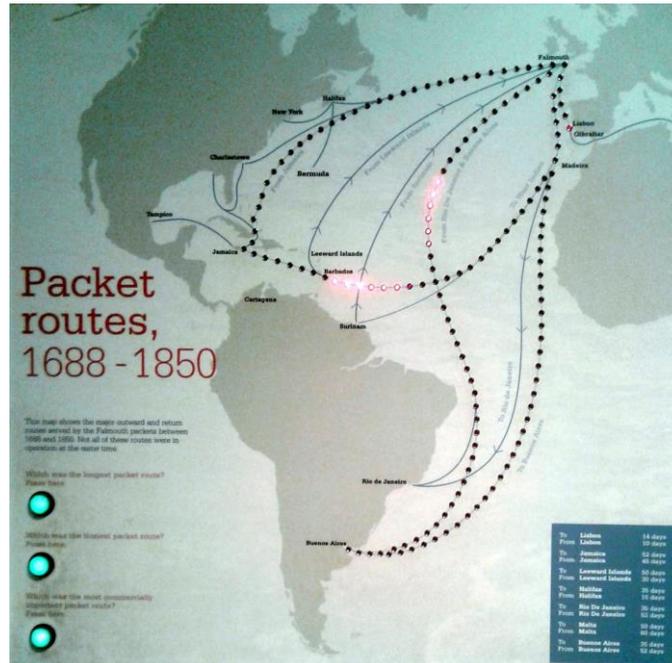
Penjerrick, with its lovely grounds, must be visited, and with a party it is a well to take a carriage. The public are admitted to the grounds by kind permission of the owner on Wednesdays and Fridays, on presentation of card. Only a botanist's pen can do justice to these grounds, so beautiful and wonderful are they. Whatever it is possible to grow in England is here grown. The gardens have been laid out with a cunning art that conceals art, and the view from the house is ravishing.

Barclay was forever riding off to oversee to the family's interests. The Pilchard harvest in Mevagissey interested me as my Harris family lived there at that time. Quoting from Barclay's notes on 30th August 1839: "*This town of stinks and wenches', as Coleridge says of Koln, - such muck, such hurry, such holla-ing, in cellar and out, such universal pilfering whenever there is opportunity. Such are this sweet characteristics of Mevagissey in fishing season.*" That particular summer my other great grandfather, Arthur Ben Harris, was five, and if his mother, Jane, did not let him out into the chaos he and his brothers and sisters could have watched the scene from the upstairs windows of Polkirt House. They could also have inhaled the odour of fish in all states of decomposition.

A few years later, back in Falmouth, Arthur Ben Harris, now an adult equipped with a medical degree, set up his surgery near the offices of the Fox Shipping business.



This latter is still in business and in the original handsome building near the quay. In the early 1800s Falmouth was the Packet Port, responsible for mail to and from America, the West Indies, Spain, Portugal and the whole of the Mediterranean. Packet boats were protected by a naval vessel stationed in the port under Admiralty orders. One can see that Falmouth had great importance for trade and employment.



However after the Napoleonic wars and the advent of steamships, Plymouth and Southampton, now connected by rail to London, were to supersede Falmouth in importance. Barclay worked hard to protect Falmouth and argued forcefully for the railway link to Exeter, the exact routing of which was debated fiercely and for too long. Falmouth lost the Packet business; the railway did come in but too late. Falmouth eventually became known as a health resort, sometimes called the Riviera of Britain.

Both journals dwell a good deal on health or rather the lack of it. One scourge of the nineteenth century was pulmonary tuberculosis called phthisis then, later known as consumption and now referred to as TB. Those so afflicted, and who could afford to travel, took ship from Falmouth at the onset of winter, to a warm dry climate. In consequence of this embarkation point a trio of bright young men, in 1840, travelled to Falmouth but were delayed from leaving for the continent by storms. In time they became good friends with Barclay, Caroline and Anna Maria.

Consumptive Henry Mill, brother of John Stuart Mill, came with his mother and sister, seeking a cure. His famous brother arrived in time to see him on his deathbed. Dr. John Calvert, son of an old school friend of the poet Wordsworth, great lover of art and collector of drawings joined but succumbed to his illness within two years. The third, John Sterling, reputedly one of the most brilliant conversationalists of the day, co-editor of the Athenaeum and a disciple of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, moved here with his family. Lodgings were found for these friends.

Another frequent visitor was Derwent Coleridge, the son of the Poet, who became headmaster of the Grammar school at Helston. Through these men Barclay and his sisters were introduced to Carlyle and the Lakeland poets. A new window on the Fox's world of science, engineering and business, was opened.

The journals are strewn with notations of the sudden unannounced arrival of this and that friend or relation at breakfast lunch and dinner. I wondered at the thoughts of those below stairs who were constantly required to find meals for half a dozen extra people at almost no notice.

On the surface it sounds as though the younger Foxes led a charmed life. The family was very close and affectionate. I never see, at least between children and parents, a hint of irritation or annoyance although Barclay has a fair bit to say about some of his uncles. However, the story from here on turns into the semblance of an operatic melodrama when read in précis form as must be in this short paper.

But, reading the journals as published entries and mentally filling in what is *not* written reveals the poignancy of tragedies bravely and stoically born by those who have learned to lean on their faith to get through each day.

Two things cast a great cloud over the happiness of this family. The prevalence of consumption and the question of marriage outside the faith. If a Quaker married out, as it was termed, they would be 'disowned'. While a particular family might well still embrace their son or daughter, the faith dictated a way of life that would make everyday living in such a circumstance extremely difficult. Barclay fell in love with Richenda Fowell Buxton daughter of Sir Thomas Buxton. On the surface it seemed a wonderful match. He pressed his suit but Richenda's mother had left the Quakers and moved over to the Church of England faith. She welcomed Barclay and would herself have offered no opposition, but Richenda took her faith seriously and after consideration said she could not embrace Quakerism. While Barclay is recovering from his broken heart his friend John Sterling's wife dies of Phthisis. In time Sterling and Caroline Fox fall in love but Sterling is both dying

himself and, is not of the faith. Caroline's dilemma is; should she marry the dying man and give herself and him a short time of happiness at the same time suffer the problems of marrying out of the faith? Her struggle which ends in her rejection of his proposal and soon, his death, results in her depression and illness. A guarded mention of this by her brother is quite expunged from her journal by the family.

The older sister, Anna Maria, is reputedly in love with Dr. John Calvert but in 1842 he too dies. Meanwhile Barclay begins to pick up his spirits. Earlier, in 1837 he gains full succession to the beautiful estate, Penjerrick. His love, care and enjoyment of this is documented throughout his journal. He meets Jane Backhouse, a Quaker from Darlington and courts her. They marry and over a period of ten happy years produce four sons and a daughter. Inevitably it seems, Barclay fell ill, TB again. He embarked on a ship to spend the winter in the sunshine of Egypt but his family never saw him again. He died some weeks later in 1855. In another five years his widow died. Caroline threw herself into being the guardian aunt to the four orphaned boys and the little daughter was sent to another aunt and uncle up north. Anna Maria never married and lived to be eighty-two.

Grove Hill, the big house in Wood Lane is a now a rest home. The Rectory in Wood Lane where Eva Christopherson and her brothers and sisters lived, is a men's club but Penjerrick, with its beautiful gardens is still a privately held Fox home.

1. Almost all research for this article is drawn from the published journals of two of his three children, Caroline (b. 1819) and Barclay (b. 1817), Brett, R.L. Ed. *Barclay Fox's Journal*, (London: Bell & Hyman, 1979), Pym, Horace N. Ed. *Memories of Old Friends: being extracts from The Journals and Letters of Caroline Fox of Penjerrick, Cornwall from 1835-1871.*, (London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1882)
2. Brett, R.L. Ed. *Barclay Fox's Journal* (London: Bell & Hyman, 1979) page 11.
3. This requirement was dropped by the universities around 1850.