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Holding history in our hands: George Fox's teapot? Or 'George Fox's teapot'?

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In the Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London, there is little chinoiserie teapot, with a broken lid, barely big enough to yield two tiny cups of tea. It is referred to as 'George Fox's teapot', and the inscription on the silver spout says 'G.F.1680'. This research note explores the significance, history, and material culture of this object and how it came to be in this collection.

The study of material culture provides the opportunity for us to read objects, whether they are contemporary or from the historical past, in a somewhat different way to that by which we might glean information from a manuscript or book. If we pay attention to the object itself, the way it was used, and by whom, then we can gain another kind of insight about the experiences, status, or role of the persons who used or made it.

Among the books and manuscripts in the LSF at Friends House, in London, there are also paintings, prints, and other objects associated with the life of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain and of its members. As in many other libraries, most of the three-dimensional objects have simply arrived there, rather than been systematically assembled. They form what might be termed 'a cabinet of curiosities'; a hodgepodge of items associated with the lives and personalities of the Religious Society of Friends.

These range from archaeological finds to a bottle of port (to be opened the day the Church of England is disestablished), and the British Friends' Nobel Peace Prize medal, received for relief work in and after World War 2 (**Figure 1**).

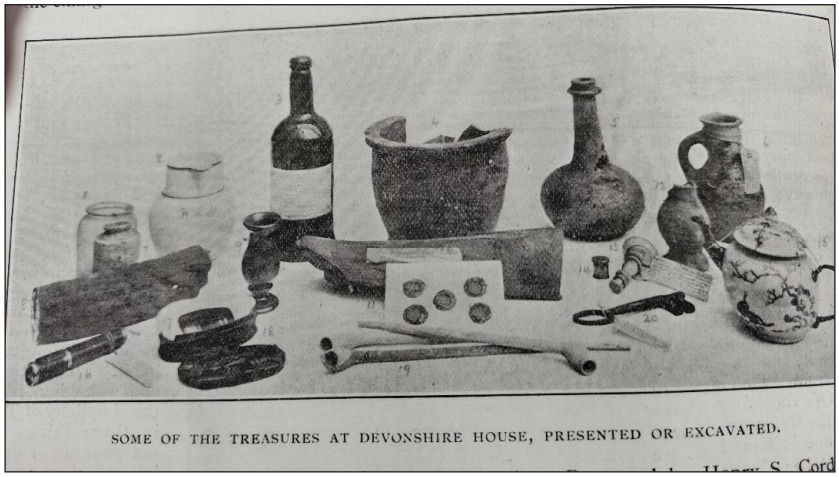

Figure 1: 'Some of the treasures' of Friends House Library, illustrated in *The Friend* 12 December, 1902.

Other items include: three Quaker bonnets; a desk, with several secret drawers, which belonged to a 17th/18th Friend, Thomas Storey; pieces wood, said to be from the elm tree under which William Penn signed the Treaty of Pennsylvania, and a 'curiously wrought staff, about 5 ft long, given by a Chinese priest, a convert to Christianity, and said to have been used by a succession of priests for over a century to remove insects from out of their path, lest by treading on them they should destroy life'.[1]

[1] *The Friend:* history and contents of the reference Library compiled from notes of Isaac Sharp's lectures and addresses, from minutes of the Meeting for Sufferings and other sources. 12 December 1902, pp. 812–815. P. 814.

And there is a teapot. A little chinoiserie teapot, with a broken lid, barely big enough to yield two tiny cups of tea. It is referred to as 'George Fox's teapot', and the inscription on the silver spout says 'G.F.1680' (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2: George Fox's teapot? and the silver spout with inscription 'GF'. Images Courtesy of Friends House Library.

I first learned about this teapot from an article about the Library miscellanea written by Norman Penney, in 1902.

I became fascinated by this teapot, and for years wondered about it and wanted to see it. Why was it in the LSF, I pondered? Had it spent many years in a cupboard in Gracechurch Street Meeting House or at Devonshire House, the previous homes of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain, until 1926 when the London offices of the Society moved to Friends House on the Euston Road?

Had Fox perhaps been in the habit of drinking tea in an office at Gracechurch Street, maybe in the intervals of attending committee meetings there? Was the pause for tea perhaps a convivial moment in his day? Did George Whitehead, or Thomas Ellwood, or any of the other habitués of Quaker committees at the time join him in a pause for refreshment? It all seemed so domestic, and familiar.

But what really exercised my mind was that if this really was George Fox's teapot, it indicates that he was very, very rich. Or his family or friends were. And it led me to realise how little I understand about the social strata within the Society of Friends in the seventeenth century, and the access to power that some of the leadership enjoyed.

Tea in late seventeenth century London was a very expensive and scarce luxury. It was then imported mainly from Holland, having been conveyed to Europe by the Dutch East India Company, in very small quantities since the 1650s, when it was imbibed as a very costly novelty beverage in a couple of London coffee houses. Samuel Pepys tried it on 25 September 1660,[2] but it became better-known among the chattering classes and

[2] 'To the office, where Sir W. Batten, Colonel Slingsby, and I sat awhile, and Sir R. Ford coming to us about some business, we talked together of the interest of this kingdom to have a peace with Spain and a war with France and Holland; where Sir R. Ford talked like a man of great reason and experience. And afterwards I did send for a cup of tee (a

the aristocracy when Catherine of Braganza introduced it to the court of King Charles II after their marriage in 1662. Fox's friend and admirer, William Penn, was also a friend of the King's younger brother (and successor), James. And Penn did actually spend time at the court of Charles 11, where he presumably encountered first-hand the tea-drinking in the circle around Queen Catherine.

In 1666 the British East India Company imported only 22lb,12oz of tea, acquired in Holland from the Dutch East India Company. And four years later the volume had risen only to 70lb.[3] But even in the 1680s tea was still eye-wateringly pricey, about two guineas for a pound of tea.[4] It was only in the 1730s, with the shipbuilding innovations that led to the construction of tea clippers, that tea was shipped from China to Britain in sufficient quantities for the price to drop and for it to become a popular drink for the masses. Similarly, when it comes to the teapot, porcelain was also scarce and expensive, imported from the East in the seventeenth century. But from about 1724, mass manufacture in Britain and Europe took off with new factory techniques.[5]

So, is it really feasible that George Fox was a tea-drinker? We know from his *Journal* that he wasn't keen on drunkenness,[6] so might he have preferred tea, which lacks the ingredients necessary for inebriation? But oh, the price! Certainly, far out of the reach of a simple man of the people. But at that stage in his life – if he ever had been – George Fox was not a simple man of the people. He had married, in 1669, Margaret Askew Fell, the widow of Thomas Fell, an MP and judge, as well as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, a position which Richard Bailey reminds us was 'one of the highest, most influential and most lucrative offices in the kingdom'.[7] Fell was one of the largest landowners in the County, which he ruled with authority delegated by the Protector, Thomas Cromwell, until his death in 1658.[8]

China drink) of which I never had drank before, and went away'. *Diary of Samuel Pepys* https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1660/09/25/. Pepys also notes in 1665 a second tea-drinking event, and in 1667 when his wife tried it for medicinal reasons.

3 Ellis, M., Coulton, R., Mauger, M.,*Empire of Tea; the Asian leaf that conquered the world*, London: Reaktion Books, 2015, p. 37.

4 Macfarlane, A. and Macfarlane, I., *Green gold: the empire of tea*, London: Ebury Press, 2003.

5 Macfarlane, A. and Macfarlane, I., *Green gold*.

6 Penney, N. (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox, Being an historical account of his life, travels, sufferings, and Christian experiences, vol. 1*London: Friends' Tracts Association, 1901;(repr.) Project Gutenberg Edition, 8 March 2025 https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/75559/pg75559-images.html.

7 Bailey, R. G., 'Research note on Judge Thomas Fell (1598–1658)', *Journal of the Quaker Historical Studies Association*, 57 (1995), pp.1–4. Incidentally, Bailey adds, p. 3, that 'When considering his role in early Quakerism the power and influence of such an important statesman cannot be underestimated'.

8 Will of Thomas Fell inRoss, I., *Margaret Fell: Mother of Quakerism*, York: William Sesssions Book Trust, 1996, appendix 10..

Subsequently, Margaret Fell retained occupancy and management of Swarthmore Hall and its demesne even after she ceded legal possession to her son George in 1665.[9] At her death, her personal assets, excluding the estate, amounted to some £500;[10] just over £114,000 at today's prices.

Fox's own finances are obscure. He was the son of a master weaver, Christopher Fox, who lived in Drayton-in-the-Clay (now called Fenny Drayton). In a paper for a conference at Lancaster in 1991 commemorating the tercentenary of George Fox's death, Larry Ingle chose to assume, very conservatively, that 'Righteous Christer' had perhaps the average income at that time for a master craftsman, about £40 per year (barely £4,000 in today's terms).[11] However, if that was the average, around half such craftsmen earned more than that, particularly those who ran an enterprise which, in those days before factory production, employed many out-workers, and with investments in other aspects of the fabric supply-chain. The Fox family home was demolished in 1955, but a photograph from 1900 shows that it was a very substantial residence, at least equivalent to an affluent merchant's house of the period (**Figure 3**). In terms of vulpine research, it is perhaps long overdue that some scholar should pursue and find Christopher Fox's will, to learn exactly how modest, or not, George Fox's background was. I have long wondered whether Fox, though less glitteringly affluent than Penn, was also the gilded son of a rich man, well able to afford to 'drop out' in his 20s, and to 'find himself'.

Figure 3: The Fox family home in Fenny Drayton, photographed in 1901 (demolished in 1955). Image courtesy of Friends House Library.

[9] Alfred B. Braithwaite: The Mystery of Swarthmore Hall, *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society* vol 51, 1965, p23

[10] Will of Margaret Fell Fox inRoss, I, *Margaret Fell: Mother of Quakerism*, York: William Sessions Book Trust, 1996, appendix 13.

[11] Ingle, H. L., 'Unravelling George Fox: the real person' *in* Mullett, M. (ed.), *New light on George Fox (1624–1691)*,York: William Sessions, 1994, p. 36–44.

In the same paper, Ingle refers to a contemporary critic of Fox, one William Rogers, who alleged that Fox had hidden some £1,200 from the tithe collectors, a charge which Fox denied, though Ingle points out that, while he denied hiding it, he didn't actually refute owning such a sum. In his entry for Fox in the Oxford Dictionary of Biography, Ingle notes again that Fox was secretive about his wealth, which included investments in shipping, and large tracts of land in both rural and urban Pennsylvania, gifts from William Penn.[12]

And, indeed, Fox's will refers to the 'things and money', which he'd left in the custody of his sister Joanna, and to land that his brother John had bought and managed at Fox's behest.[13] So maybe Rogers was right about the concealed wealth?[14]

The will also refers to an 'outlandish cup' and to various 'physical things that come from across the sea'. It mentions a magnifying glass, a tortoiseshell comb and case, more than one prospect-glass (an early form of telescope) and not one but two equinoctial dials – natty instruments for determining the time at any latitude, invented in the 1640s and in Fox's time still elegant toys for gents with plenty of disposable money to hand (**Figure 1**).[15]

And of course, fittingly, for one of the most prolific authors in the highly literate Society of Friends, Fox owned a lot of books. Nickalls[16] refers to some 339 volumes, some 112 of which had been inventoried, and which included among many Quaker writings a New Testament in eight languages, and more than 30 mystical works by other authors, including Thomas a Kempis; and a copy of the Koran.[17]

So, yes, it would seem perfectly feasible that George Fox might have had a teapot. Perhaps it is included in his will among the 'physical things that come from across the sea'? Though, unlike his comb, it is not specifically mentioned.

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[12] Ingle, H. L., 'Fox, George (1624–1691)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004*, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/10031., accessed ?.

[13] *Will of George Fox*, no publisher cited, held at LSF

[14] Noble, V., *The life and times of George Fox, founder of the Quaker movement*, London:Elek Books Ltd., 1953, appendix, p. 287. Reproduced from the Cambridge edition of Fox's *Journal*.

[15] Invented by Thomas Oughtred (1574–1660), described in his book on sundials in 1652. https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-6010061, accessed 12 June 2024.

[16] Nickalls, J. L., 'George Fox's Library', *Journal of Friends' Historical Society*, XXVII (1931), p. 3–21. Nickalls notes, p24, that 'Judging from the average contents of seventeenth century bound volumes of Friends' books in the Library at Friends House, there must have been several thousand works in the collection'. Nickalls also notes in the same that Fox's instructions regarding the disposal of his books and papers kept at the home of William Meade, and elsewhere, are printed in the Camb *Journal*, vol ii pp. 349–351.

[17] Fox's library was not nearly so extensive, though, as that of Daniel Pastorius, the [Swiss] Friend who, as a member of Germantown Meeting, prepared the first Minute querying slaveholding in Pennsylvania. Pastorius owned more than 1022 volumes, including 21 works by Fox, 11 by James Naylor, and 32 by William Penn, the original Pennsylvania slave-holder. He also owned other works of theology and philosophy, geometry and physics, herbals, and a collection of Arabian Nights tales. See Riley, L. W., 'Books from the 'Beehive' manuscript of Francis Daniel Pastorius', *Journal of Friends' Historical Society*, XXVII (1931), pp. 116–129.

The teapot itself is a dainty, decorative object, a pleasure to hold and to contemplate. It is barely four inches high and similarly broad. Its body delicately decorated, with images of birds and foliage, it has a silver spout and a rattan handle.

Of course, if it belonged to George Fox this is a seventeenth century pot, made either in China or Japan, before the European porcelain industry existed. It has not been appraised by a ceramics specialist, but it would indeed appear to be a hard paste porcelain pot consistent in materials and decoration with other pots of that vintage, brought to Europe from Japan in the seventeenth century.

This piece is a little white pot, which, after it was first glazed, was fired once again after it had been decorated with images of birds and foliage, using a limited palette mainly of soft blue, green, red and yellow. This decoration is in what is called the kakiemon style, after the pottery where it was invented in Japan some time before the 1680s. It was a very popular form of Japanese export porcelain up to about the 1740s, and both the shapes of objects and their decoration were widely copied by manufacturers in China, France, Germany and Britain, at the Chantilly, Meissen and Bow and Chelsea potteries.

The images of birds and plants on this pot are typical of kakiemon ware, which was commonly decorated with depictions of birds, especially pairs of quail or storks; flowers, particularly the chrysanthemum; and foliage, such as pine, plum and bamboo (‘the three friends of winter’ in Japanese iconography).

The rattan-covered handle is consistent with a seventeenth century date. This was a traditional form of handle from the eighth century in China, though it became less common among pots made for Western use after about 1715.

However, without reliable identifying features, it is very difficult to determine the age or even the origin of a piece of ceramic. The best one can do is to say ‘ah, this piece is consistent with others which we know to have been made or imported at a particular period’. Or ‘it cannot have been produced before a particular date, as that kind of handle, or decoration, or lid or whatever was not invented until then’.

Similarly, the place of manufacture is very difficult to identify in the absence of factory-marks – sometimes a number or a cypher. Porcelain manufacturers in Britain, France, Germany and China all copied shapes and patterns of decoration from each other. Though of course particular factories or localities are known to have produced wares which are particularly their own. The practice of factory marking was introduced by a German manufacturer, Meissen, in 1723, and most other producers gradually followed suit.

But the spout is particularly interesting. Silver was often used for minor repairs, usually to the tip of a teapot spout, right up to the late nineteenth century. The value of a porcelain teapot in the seventeenth century and eighteenth century was sufficient

to warrant a relatively expensive repair, rather than simply throwing away the pot and buying a new one. But this, unusually, is a whole spout; elaborately made and delicately inserted. The initials 'GF' and a date, 1680, are engraved on the spout, possibly at the time it was made – but quite possibly much later. These initials, of course, appear to be evidence that the teapot belonged to George Fox himself, and that it had been repaired or at least owned by Fox in 1680, though the elaborate rococo design of the spout indicates that it was more likely an eighteenth or even nineteenth century repair.

So, what is the provenance of this pot? What do we know of how it came to be in the care of the LSF, and with a history describing it as having belonged to George Fox?

It was given to London Yearly Meeting[18] in 1899, by the executors of a Friend, Edward Corder, who had bought it from an antique dealer in Chelmsford, in Essex. In an article for *The Friend*, Norman Penney, the Friends' House librarian at the time, explains that 'It was bought by the late Edward Corder, about 1880, of a Jew of Chelmsford, acting in kindness on behalf of an aged woman whose account of her possession of the relic was that a long while ago one of her relatives lived in America, with one of Mrs Fox's descendants, and that upon leaving her service, the teapot was given as a keepsake'.[19]

Well, that's the story. That part of it may even be true. Who knows. An object, and a legend, which were both treasured by the family, perhaps. Or invented by the dealer who saw before him a gullible Quaker porcelain collector?

But the teapot. Could it really have been Fox's teapot? Alas, that is not very likely. It has never been properly appraised, though two curators at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge have commented on a set of photographs. They thought it a delightful little piece, very good of its kind. Yes, Kakiemon ware. Old. Just, probably, not quite old enough to have belonged to George Fox. It looks to them more likely to be made in Europe than in the Far East, probably at the Meissen pottery in Germany, some time after the factory started making hard-paste white porcelain in 1713.

It has no markings, so if it is Meissen, it is possible that it was made before the characteristic crossed swords logo was introduced in 1723. Or it might, though unmarked, be as late as 1730–40. Meissen copies could be extremely close to the original Japanese kakiemon ware, and the Fitzwilliam team suggest, without having actually handled the pot, that this may be one such copy.

The silver-spout gives no precise clue to its age. It is in the rococo style, so is likely to have been an eighteenth century repair, or possibly even nineteenth century. The inscription could have been added at any time. Yes, perhaps at the time when the pot

[18] London Yearly Meeting has been renamed, and is now known as Britain Yearly Meeting.

[19] Penney, N., 'Some of the other items and treasures' *The Friend*, 12 December 1902, p. 818.

was repaired, or maybe as late as the week before the enterprising antique dealer sold it to his Quaker customer. It is rather shaky, and doesn't look particularly professional. It is in a very obvious spot, but not really where one would expect to find such an inscription. So, one might conclude that because the spout was silver, the vendor was tempted to add some 'definitive' evidence of its past.

So, what are we left with? A teapot, certainly. One with a history, perhaps but not necessarily, the history which earned it its place initially in the LSF collection. Now, though, it still has a story to tell, and, perhaps a moral.

And, to me, that moral is to test, test, test what we understand to be true, and what we understand to be history. Part of this paper was presented at the George Fox quartercentennial conference in Lancaster in 2024. One of the questions before that conference, and, for instance, also at the 1994 Fox conference, was the extent to which it might be true to acclaim George Fox as the founder, rather than one of the founders, of Quakerism.

I have long found that claim irritating, particularly when it is in the form of an unthinking statement, even, or especially, on the lips of a Quaker scholar. Or is it even more problematic when it is a 'known fact' in Quaker circles?

Wasn't Fox that chap who arrived late to the party, when the Westmoreland Seekers had already been meeting, and worshipping, and had already organised themselves into local and monthly meetings?[20] In other words, well before they met Fox. They, like the Baptists and several other nonconformist groups of the time, had created the form of organisation which Fox credits himself with having perpetrated. Wasn't it Fox who, having outlived other prominent early figures such as John Audland, Edward Burrough, Francis Howgill, Richard Farnsworth, Mary Fisher, John Lilburne, Gervase Benson and notably, another charismatic preacher and prolific author, James Naylor, effectively wrote them out of the history in the *Journal* which he wrote and dictated, first published in 1694? Geoffrey Nuttall points out that even the person who wrote the introduction to the Journal, his friend and acolyte William Penn, didn't present Fox as *the* founder of the Society of Friends, only as 'one of the founders'.[21]

It does the Society of Friends itself no service if Quakers fail to interrogate both the claims of someone already well-known to have massaged history in his *Journal*, and to interrogate why it is, in a group which ostensibly eschews earthly cult leadership, it is easier and more beguiling, to adopt the shorthand of leadership than to confront the

[20] Ryrie, A., 'Seeking the Seekers', *Studies in Church History*, 57; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp.185–209.

[21] Nuttall, G. F., 'Reflections on William Penn's preface to George Fox's Journal', *Quaker History*, 57 no 2 (1995), pp. 113–117. Penn takes care not to exaggerate. Fox was never the only leader, before concentrating on Fox, Penn lists by name as many as fourteen other Friends of 'the first great convincement'. Naylor is at the head of the list'.. Nuttall also suggests that, to Penn, Fox and his contemporaries are all part of a consortium in early Quaker thought.

theological and daily practical challenges of its avowed status as a group which identifies God not individuals as its head, and which refers to itself a priesthood of believers.[22]

So, back to the teapot. Should it be withdrawn, or in more formal language, 'de-accessioned' from the LSF collection? Or should it be, as I hope, kept and even celebrated, in the recognition that wilful misattribution is a very human error, and in this instance is part of the shared Quaker history. I strongly suggest that it, and the many other material objects with equally unproven histories in the Friends House and other Quaker collections, will continue to be held and appreciated, both for their intrinsic interest and also as illustrations of how, at different times in the movement's history, Friends have woven stories about the Quaker past.

Oh, and its putative owner. Does it matter one way or the other if Fox was well-heeled? Personally, I think so, in that I think that Christopher Hill has a point, was Fox really the undisputed leader of the Society of Friends before 1661? Did the Society succumb to the tendency which Hill notes among conventicle sects to acquiesce to the leadership of the rich and influential? Was there actually a take-over by Fox, Fell, and Penn by 1669? Is there some scholar who might enjoy taking forward Hill's question about the interplay of wealth and leadership in the Religious Society of Friends in the seventeenth century?

If it is indeed Fox's own teapot, then its very existence gives us a glimpse of Fox's daily life, and of the wealth and the quality of objects which surrounded him. Tea was only introduced to Britain in the mid-seventeenth century. By the 1680s it was still a luxury item, imported by the British East India Company for consumption in coffee houses and in wealthy private homes. The teapot, like the books and scientific instruments mentioned in Fox's will reminds us if not of Fox's own status as a wealthy man, then certainly of the wealth of the family into which he married.

So; the teapot is either George Fox's teapot, or 'George Fox's teapot'. Either way, the fact that it has found its way into the collection at Friends House is also part of the story; it is held as a relic associated with a major character in Quaker history, but, like so many relics in other family and religious contexts, it may or may not be an authentic association. But, too, the scrupulous acknowledgement of doubt on the part of the librarians who are its custodians is another part of the story. As in many other debates about Quaker history, we have to recognise that while cultural myths might help build a community, veracity and a deeper understanding of the social and historical context actually yields a more satisfying understanding of what is 'true'.

This has been a study not simply of a little antique object, it is also a reflection about storytelling and stewardship, myth-making and cultural transmission within the Religious Society of Friends.

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[22] *Quaker Faith & Practice; the book of Christian discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 2013, pp. 27.35–36.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.