

Mary Akehurst (c1635-1691), Early Quaker of Lewes

By Geoffrey Barber

Mary Akehurst is one of the interesting characters in East Sussex history. We are fortunate that various episodes of her life as a Quaker were recorded and that wills and other documents exist to give us a good understanding of her family background.

Although best remembered as a Quaker, Mary was also a merchant carrying on her husband Raphe Akehurst's business after he died in 1666. A tangible link to her exists today through the tokens she issued in 1667 which bear her name (Fig. 1).¹ She was an independent woman who lived at a critical time in the development of religious freedoms in England.



Fig. 1. Mary Akehurst's token, 1667

She was born Mary Baker about 1635 at Hastings in Sussex, the daughter of Richard Baker, yeoman, and Anne Akehurst. Her parents were reasonably wealthy as evidenced by her father's will, proved in 1638, which left her a bequest of £250 when she reached age 21 years or married, whichever came first. Her three siblings received similar amounts.²

Mary's grandfather, John Akehurst (c1565-1630), was Mayor of Hastings in 1614.³ Her mother Anne Baker (nee Akehurst), who later remarried to become Anne Franck, was sister to the wealthy John Akehurst who

married Anne Newington in 1631 and lived at Cralle at Warbleton, a manor house that was largely rebuilt in 1722 and was then known as Cralle Place (Fig. 2). John Akehurst had property interests, including Akehurst Farm at Hellingly, as well as operating an iron forge and furnace at Cowbeech (Cralle).⁴ They were highly regarded gentry and the parish registers always refer to him as Mr. John Akehurst. He left a will made in 1657 naming his sister Anne Francke and that is how we know of the connection to Mary.⁵

Mary married Raphe Akehurst of St Thomas at the Cliffe, Lewes (possibly a cousin), on 11 August 1653 at Warbleton. The location suggests that her wedding may have been hosted by John Akehurst mentioned above. Raphe's father was a merchant who traded from Lewes across the English Channel with Dieppe and Calais as well as London. On two instances, in 1622 and 1638, he was suspected of smuggling but nothing came of it.⁶ He died in 1654 and left a will.⁷

¹ The Akehurst token is Sussex W73 in George C Williamson (Ed.): "Trade Tokens issued in the Seventeenth Century in England, Wales and Ireland, etc." (1891).

² Will of Richard Baker of Hastings, Sussex, England, made 10 Sep 1637, proved in the Archdeaconry Court of Lewes, 27 Jan 1637/38. (ESRO: PBT/1/1/25/80).

³ W. G. Moss, *The History and Antiquities of the Town and Port of Hastings. Illustrated by A Series of Engravings From Original Drawings*, (1824).

⁴ Wealden Iron Research Group Database: <http://www.wirgdata.org/searchpro2.cgi?personid=1284> and <http://www.wirgdata.org/searchsites2.cgi?siteid=550> Accessed 27 Sep 2018.

⁵ Will of John Akehurst of Warbleton, Sussex, England, made 5 Aug 1657, proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 21 Oct 1657. (TNA: PROB 11/268/302).

⁶ Colin Brent, "Pre-Georgian Lewes: c890-1714: the emergence of a county town", 1st Edition (2004), p. 258, p. 311

⁷ Will of Raphe Akehurst of Lewes, Sussex, England, made 23 Dec 1652, proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 26 Dec 1654. (TNA: PROB 11/248/299).

His son Raphe, Mary's husband, continued in the business and his later will mentions a 1/12th interest in a barque (boat) doubtlessly used for trading.⁸

Just two years after Mary's marriage, in 1655, the first preaching by a Quaker in Sussex occurred at Horsham and in the same year they preached at Lewes where a group calling themselves "Seekers" were converted. Mary was an early convert and the subsequent persecutions she suffered in her lifetime, including time spent in prison, clearly show her to be an independent woman with a strong will.

Mary's first recorded suffering as a Quaker was in 1659 at the hands of her own husband, who was clearly not a sympathiser. After Mary disrupted a church meeting by questioning the priest, her husband was called for and she received quite a beating from him. This continued over the ensuing weeks and included her being chained up inside her house, causing such concern among her friends that they reported it to the Justices of the Peace. The episode is recorded in the Quaker Sufferings:⁹

In this year [1659] Mary Akehurst, the wife of Ralph Akehurst, of the Cliff, neare Lewis, being moved to goe to St Michal's Steeplehouse (soe called), where an Independent priest [Walter Postlethwaite] was speaking, she for asking him a question, was by people haled out, and then sent for her aforesaid husband, who after she came home, did so hunch and pincht her, that she could not lift her arms to her head. The same Ralph again on the seventeenth day of the third month of this present yeare, bound the hands and feet of his said wife and pinioned her, and then covered her 19 very hot with bed-cloathes, and soe kept her for the space of foure or five houres; this it seems he did because she tooke occasion to reprove a hireling priest for belying her. Againe, upon the twenty-fifth day of the eighth month, the aforesaid Ralph did sorely abuse his wife, on which the following lines were sent unto two Justices of the Peace (soe called), to complain of and to declare the same that she might not perish in private, but to lay it home to them, then in authority, viz.: Whereas complaint hath beene made unto two of those who are in place to doe justice as, namely, Richard Boughton and Nathaniel Studly, of cruel persecution inflicted upon the body of a woman in the Clift, neare Lewis, by the hands of a wicked tirant, who is called her husband; his name is Ralph Akehurst, he hath chained his wife in a close back chamber in his house, between two high bed-steads, with a great chain much like a timber chain, containing thirty-five links, and a staple and lock, soe that this woman cannot move aboute the roome, or lye in the bed without this chaine, soe that with wait of itt it hath done much wrong to her legg, besides blows and bruises that he hath given her in executing his cruelty in putting on of this chaine, soe that thereby her body is much weakened at present, and murther may ensue if the Lord by his providence doth not some way for her deliverance; for this man hath promised that he will never unlock the chaine from off her, soe that in all likelyhood his heart is bent to destroy the body of this woman someway, for he hath attempted her life, as she hath said, by endeavouring to throatle her. We set this forth to declare to the world, that if this woman shall putt off the body or sacrifice her life through his cruelty, that none shall hereafter upon just grounds say that she hath destroyed herself, or done any evil to her owne body, soe that if inocent blood be shead, we shall be cleare and the guilt shall remaine upon the heads which suffer such things to be done.

Mary Akehurst Subscribed by Mary Coulstock Ambrose Galloway Mary Dapson

⁸ Will of Raphe Akehurst of Lewes, Sussex, England, made 27 Aug 1666, proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 5 Oct 1666. (TNA: PROB 11/322/49).

⁹ David Hitchin, "Quakers in Lewes: an informal history", 2nd Edition (2010), pp. 18-20

This paper was not only sent to two justices, but a copy of it was placed on the church door in the Cliffe, and another on the market-house post in Lewis.

Mary was probably quite relieved by the death of her husband seven years later in 1666 who left in his will *unto my dearly beloved wife Mary Akehurst Two hundred pounds Sterling and a request that she follow such Trade in buying and selling as she with the advice of my Executors and Overseers shall think most fit.* His death would have given her greater freedom to exercise her independence and religion. She never married again.¹⁰

It should be noted that it is uncertain as to whether Raphe Akehurst ever received Mary's inheritance of £250. In response to a complaint made by Mary's mother, Anne Francke, in 1657 he says *the said legacy aforesaid given by the said Richard Baker to this defendant's [Raphe's] wife is to this day unpaid notwithstandinge the same hath been due & payable above three yeares since & notwithstandinge this defendant hath often tymes in friendly mann[er] requested the same.* Raphe claimed that the marriage settlement agreed when he married Mary Baker in 1653 promised him £400 and upon receipt of that money he would make his wife a jointure (effectively joint ownership) in the dwelling where he lived and also in the surrounding meadow ground which had a yearly rental value of £20 or thereabouts, and to give his own bond to leave his wife £400 worth of personal estate in case she should survive him. It appears that the promises made in the marriage settlement had not been kept. Mary's mother Anne seems to have had her own problems as her second husband had died c1648 and in a dispute over his will (which left everything to be held in trust for the benefit of the children of their marriage), Anne's claims were found to be 'lacking in truth' but no details are given (refer will of Richard Francke of Hastings, 1648). Anne was the executor of her first husband's estate but not of her second husband's and this may have caused some problems for her. Raphe states that she had paid the legacy owed to her eldest son, Richard Baker, and a later document in 1691 would seem to say that the other surviving siblings, Mary and Alexander, had still not received theirs. Nevertheless, Raphe left a £200 legacy to Mary in his will of 1666. Perhaps some money or property had changed hands, we just don't know the full picture. Anne Francke seems to be at the centre of a complex web of disputes over money and property and in 1691 it is stated that the £200 she brought into her marriage to Richard Francke c1639 had not been repaid to the children of Anne's first husband as agreed would happen after Richard Francke's death (c1648) and suggests that Richard Francke's executor's bore the responsibility for paying the legacies to Anne's children from her first marriage.^{11, 12}

After Raphe's death in 1666, Mary carried on the family business and in 1667 issued a half penny token in her name, many of which survive today as a tangible remnant of her life. Copper or brass tokens were issued by traders as a result of the civil war (1642-1660) leaving the country short of coins. As the King had been deposed there was no law preventing the issuing of tokens as coinage, which would otherwise have been the King's prerogative. It is estimated that about 20,000 businesses in England produced tokens in order to carry on their business and examples of about 14,000 of these survive. Their usage was suppressed by a 1672 proclamation banning their use although they were to re-appear in the period 1787-97 as Provincial tokens.¹³

Some of the interesting events recorded during Mary's lifetime include:^{14, 15}

¹⁰ Will of Raphe Akehurst of Lewes, Sussex, England, made 27 Aug 1666, proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, 5 Oct 1666. (TNA: PROB 11/322/49).

¹¹ *Reply of Ralph Akehurst, defendant, to the Bill of Complaint of Anne Franck, widow, Complainant*, dated 21 May 1657, (TNA: C 6/135/84)

¹² *Assignment of mortgage for £138 13s 4d*, dated 17 Aug 1691, (ESRO: MIL 1/15/2)

¹³ http://www.thecoppercorner.com/history/17thC_hist.html. Accessed 29 Sep 2018.

¹⁴ Joseph Besse, "Sufferings of Early Quakers: Southern England 1653 to 1690", Facsimile of part of the 1753 edition. Sessions Book Trust, York, England (2006). Chap. XXXIV

¹⁵ David Hitchin, "Quakers in Lewes: an informal history", 2nd Edition (2010).

- In 1672 Mary was visited by William Penn who lodged with her. Penn was an early Quaker and advocate of democracy and religious freedom, and later the founder of the English North American Colony the Province of Pennsylvania.
- In 1673 Mary Akehurst, widow, was fined £7 5s. for being part of a meeting of Friends (Quakers) and then £10 for the same in 1676.
- In 1677 Mary was prosecuted for not paying church tithes and excommunicated. She was committed to Horsham gaol and kept prisoner there for about a year
- In 1681 the Friend's Monthly Meeting reproved Widow Akehurst for allowing her children to scoff at people on the fast day as they went to the Steeplehouse [church].
- In 1682, Mary's children Ralph, Mary, Thomas and Alexander were indicted for non-attendance at church ("Absence from the National Worship").
- In 1683, Mary Akehurst and her children Mary and Thomas were fined for absenting themselves from church for three Sundays. The judge issued a warrant for distraining their goods (supposedly to the value of the fine but often more was taken).

Mary was one of the last Quakers to be held prisoner at Horsham gaol. In 1687, at about 52 years of age, she was prosecuted for not paying church tithes and excommunicated for refusing to pay. She remained a prisoner there for 7 months before being committed to the Kings Bench debtors' prison in London, considered a much more comfortable place than Horsham gaol! The following text quoted from the Quaker Sufferings dramatically describes the event:¹⁶

• ANNO 1687. Mary Akehurst, of the Cliff, near Lewis [Lewes], Widow, having been prosecuted in the Ecclesiastical Court for Tithes, at the Suit of John Eresby, Priest, was excommunicated, and on the 9th of the Month called July, near Midnight, was taken by two Bayliffs with a Writ de Excommunicato capiendo. The next Day, being the Day called Sunday, they carried her away to Prison, though she had been a long time sick, and was even then so weak, that she could not walk without holding : Nevertheless, one of the Bayliffs, being drunk, when he got on Horseback, with many Oaths and Threatnings had her set upon his Horse, and would not suffer her to take Necessaries with her, so that her Friends thought she could not live till she came to the Prison : But the barbarous Bayliff swore, that *If she could not hold it to Prison, which was twenty Miles, he would tie her, and drag her thither at his Horse's Tail.* Being brought to Horsham Goal, she was kept close Prisoner there about seven Months, and then was removed to London, and committed to the King's-Bench. The unusual Cruelty exercised on this innocent Woman, proceeded from an inveterate Malice the Parson had long conceived against Thomas Akehurst her Son, on the following Occasion : The Priest had made a false Information against Thomas Akehurst for being at two Meetings, where he was not : Akehurst indicted the Parson for Perjury, and the Grand Jury found the Bill against him at Lewis Sessions in 1683. This enraged the Parson, and he, as it was generally thought, by way of Revenge, thus severely prosecuted his aged sickly Mother.

The worst of the persecution ended in 1689 with the passing of The Act of Toleration which released Quakers from the obligation of attending church and taking the sacraments. However, they were still liable for the payment of tithes and suffered much financial loss during the next two centuries.¹⁷

Mary continued her membership and support of the Society of Friends (Quakers) at Lewes until her death in 1691. She had the support of her surviving children Raphe, Thomas and Mary who were also Quakers, all of whom were persecuted at various times. She died at Lewes, aged about

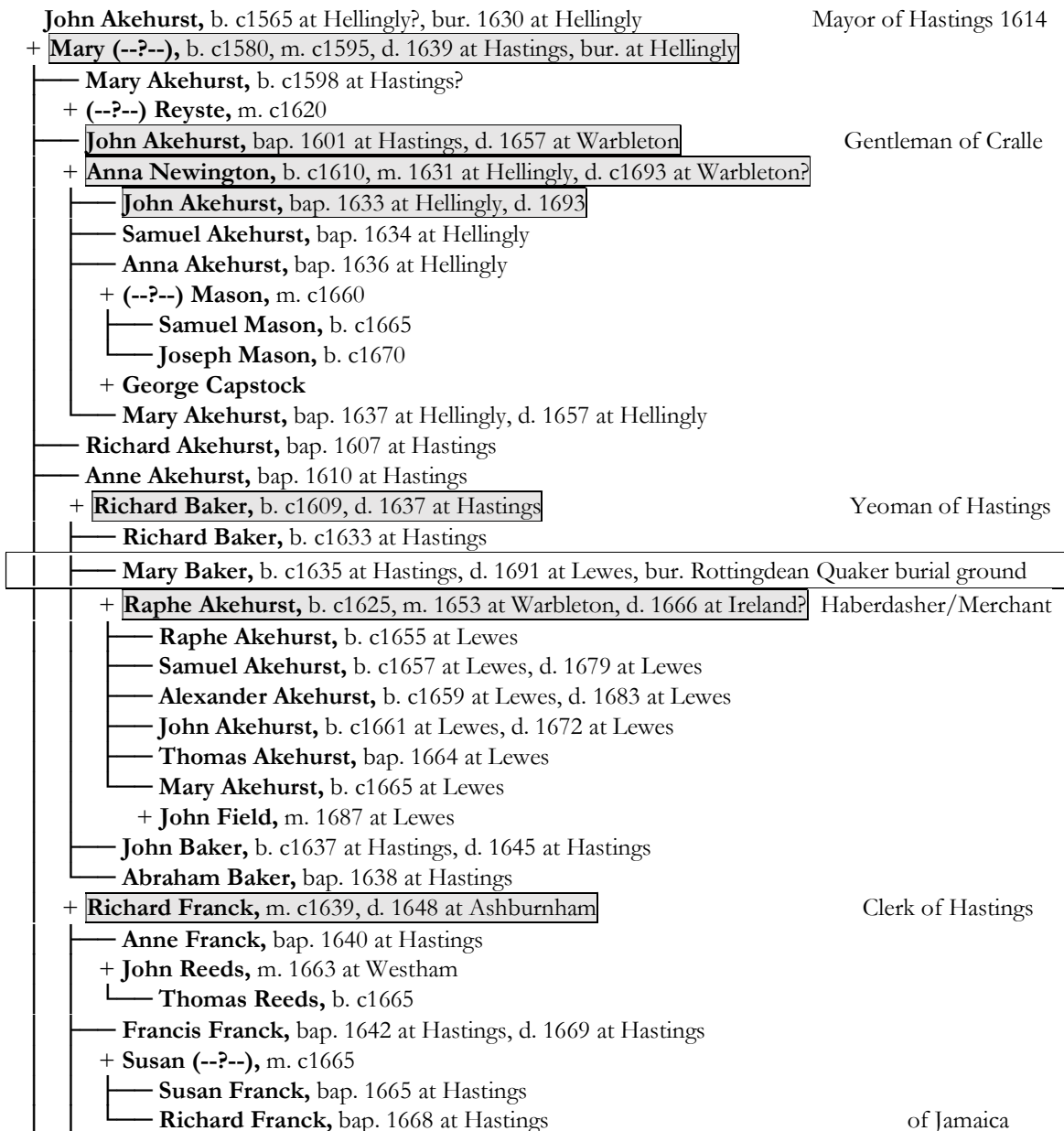
¹⁶ Joseph Besse, "Sufferings of Early Quakers: Southern England 1653 to 1690", Facsimile of part of the 1753 edition. Sessions Book Trust, York, England (2006). p. 734

¹⁷ David Hitchin, "Quakers in Lewes: an informal history", 2nd Edition (2010). p. 45

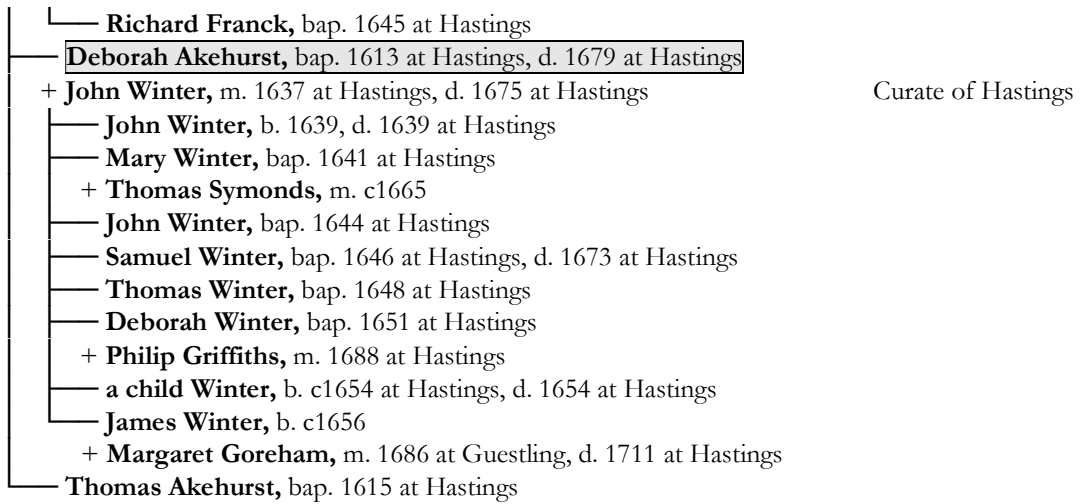
56 years and was buried on 29 September 1691 at the Quaker burial ground at Rottingdean where three of her children, John, Samuel and Alexander had been buried in 1672, 1679 and 1683 respectively.¹⁸ Quakers would not have their bodies buried in consecrated ground and so provided their own burial grounds. She was a committed Quaker to the end and that is probably how she would want to be remembered.

Mary Baker's Family Tree

(People who left wills/admons highlighted in grey and transcriptions or abstracts are available from the SFHG Wills Depository. All places in Sussex unless otherwise shown.)



¹⁸ The Quaker Burial Ground at Rottingdean is on the local heritage list and is at the corner of The Green and Dean Court Road (50°48'26.7"N, 0°03'27.9"W or 50.807421, -0.057756).



Note:

The 1691 document “Assignment of mortgage” (ESRO: MIL 1/15/2) provides detailed genealogical information which was crucial to establishing the above family tree.